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A Complete Action Novel
By
RUSSELL A BANKSON

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We are looking for Smart People

Yes—we are looking for smart people. We want smart people everywhere to help us advertise our business and distribute our products. We are going to award **several thousands of dollars in big cash prizes** to people everywhere. Prizes will be awarded to those who win in the prize distribution we will tell you about when we hear from you. See how many faces you can find.

Tell us in the coupon below and we will tell you how to win. Here's a lot of cash for some one Would you like to have it? I am going to pay $5,000.00 in big cash prizes to advertise our business quickly. Someone, maybe you, will receive new Buick Sedan and $1,250.00 cash extra for promptness or if you win 1st prize and prefer all cash you get $2,250.00. **Answer quick.**

SEND ONLY THE COUPON BELOW AND WE WILL TELL YOU HOW TO..

Win $2,250.00

or Buick Sedan and $1,250.00 Cash!

Surely you would like to have this magnificent prize. Think what you could do with all this money. It would come in pretty handy right now, wouldn't it? **Then fill in the coupon below** and we will tell you how you can win **$2,250.00.**

We want people everywhere to know us and to share in this great distribution of money Besides the first grand prize, $2,250.00 including promptness, there are 100 other big cash prizes. The second grand prize is $750.00 cash. third grand cash prize is $600.00 cash and many others Duplicate prizes paid in case of ties. Thousands of dollars more in Special Cash Rewards which we will tell you all about when we get your answer **This is your opportunity. Answer today.**

Send No Money — Just Mail Coupon

Study this interesting picture and see how many of the faces hidden in the tree, clouds, etc., you can find. Some look straight at you, some are upside down—others are sidewise. It is not as easy as some people may think, but don't give up—keep looking and you may find them. **Mark them and send to me quick with the coupon** and I will tell you how to win first prize so you will receive the Buick Sedan and $1,250.00 cash extra for promptness.

Many people have received big cash prizes. **Some have received several thousand dollars.** Names furnished on request. Now is your chance to win a big cash prize. **Answer today and see for yourself.** Oh Boy! What you could do with $2,250.00 all cash at one time. I will be glad to pay it to you if you are adjudged the winner

Hurry—mark the faces you find, send your answer quick We will tell you how to win the $2,250.00 prize.

SEND ANSWER QUICK

Remember, **send not one penny** with your answer—all you do now is to find as many faces as you can, and mail the coupon. We will answer you right away and tell you how you can win.

For PROMPTNESS $1,250.00 EXTRA

Send answer quick and we will tell you how to get $1,250.00 extra cash for promptness

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Des Moines, Iowa

DEPT 1108 I found_____faces.

My Name_____

Address_____

City_____ State_____

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☐ Law	☐ Commercial Law	☐ Business English
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*Name*_____ *Position*_____

*Address*_____

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THRILLING WESTERN

Vol. IV, No. 1 G. B. FARNUM, *Editor* January, 1935

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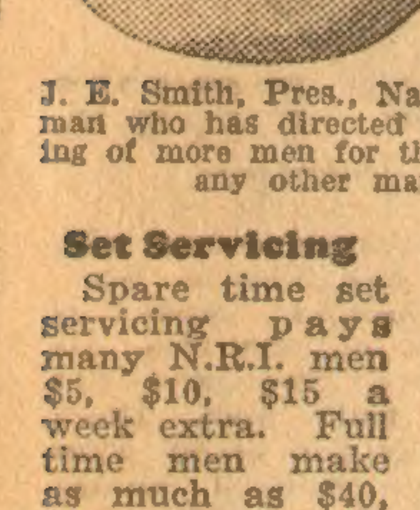

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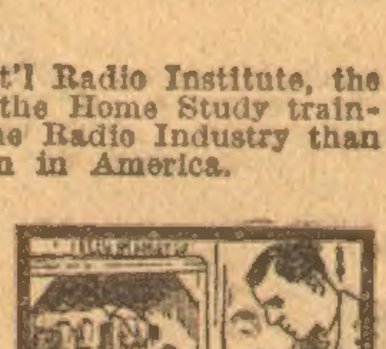

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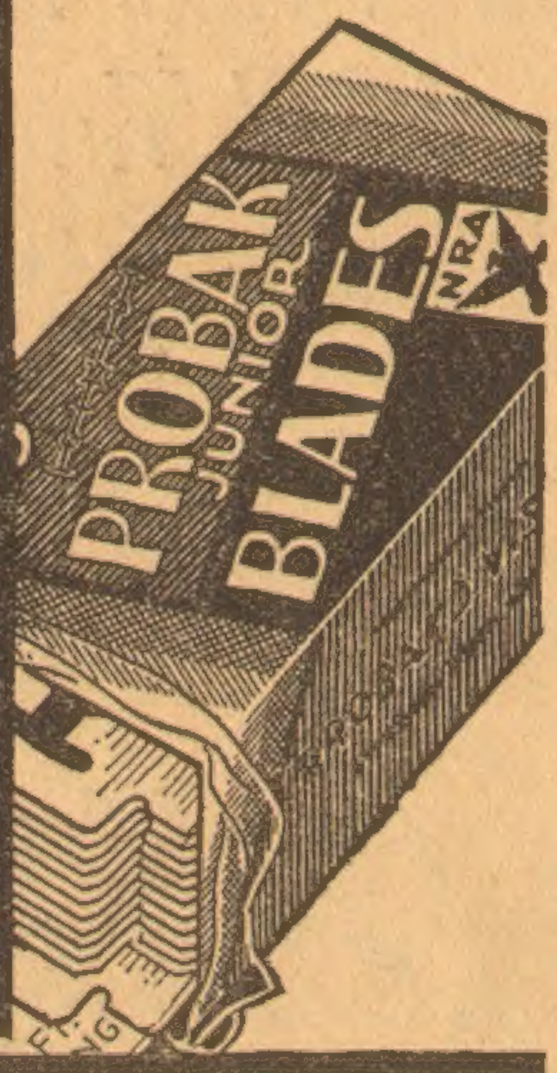

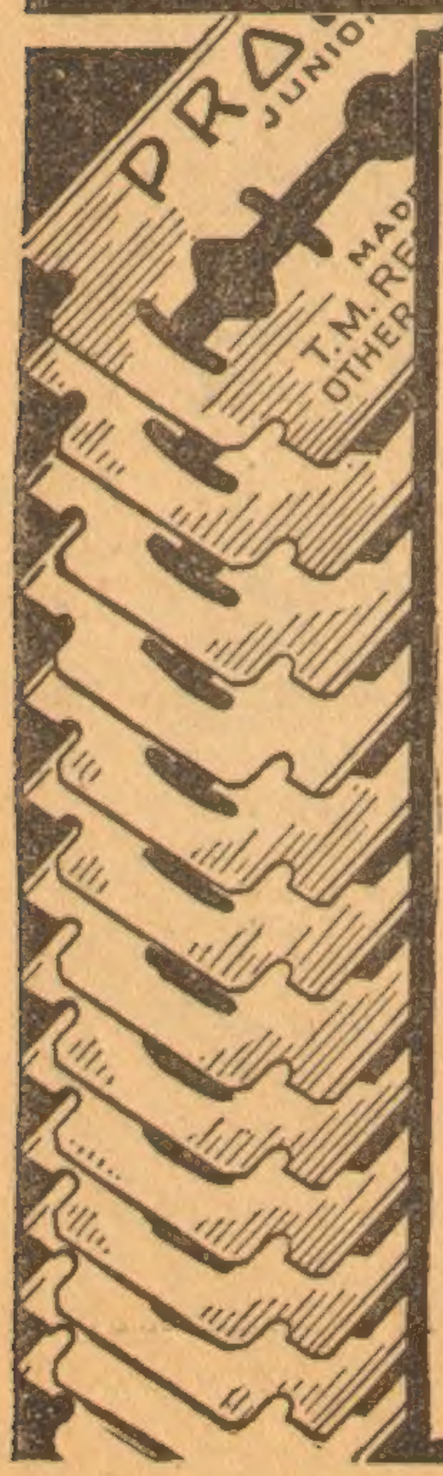

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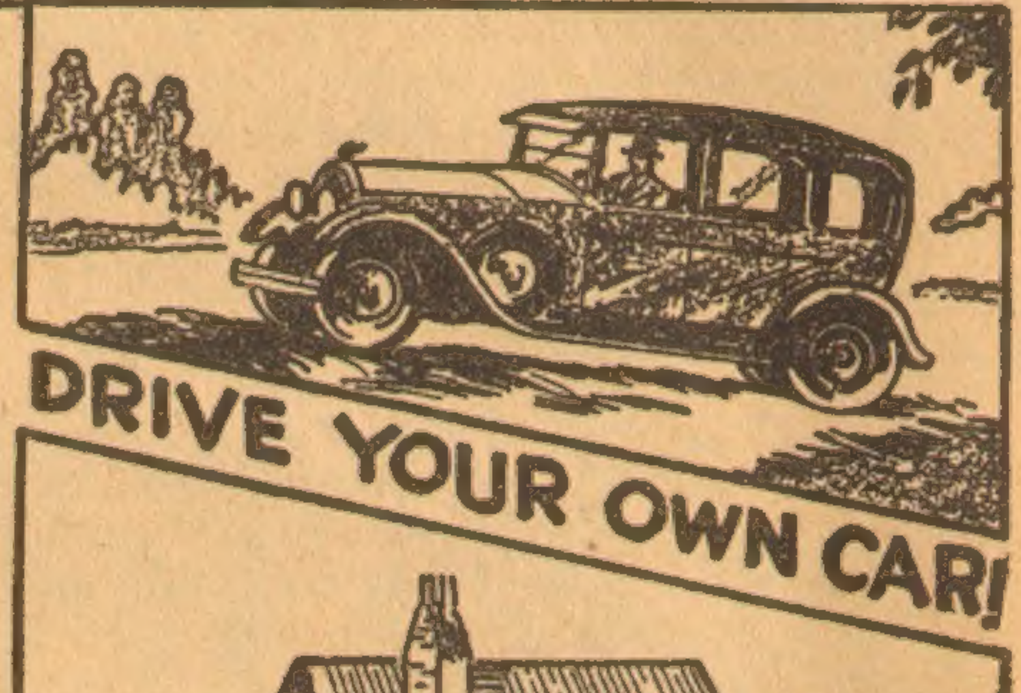

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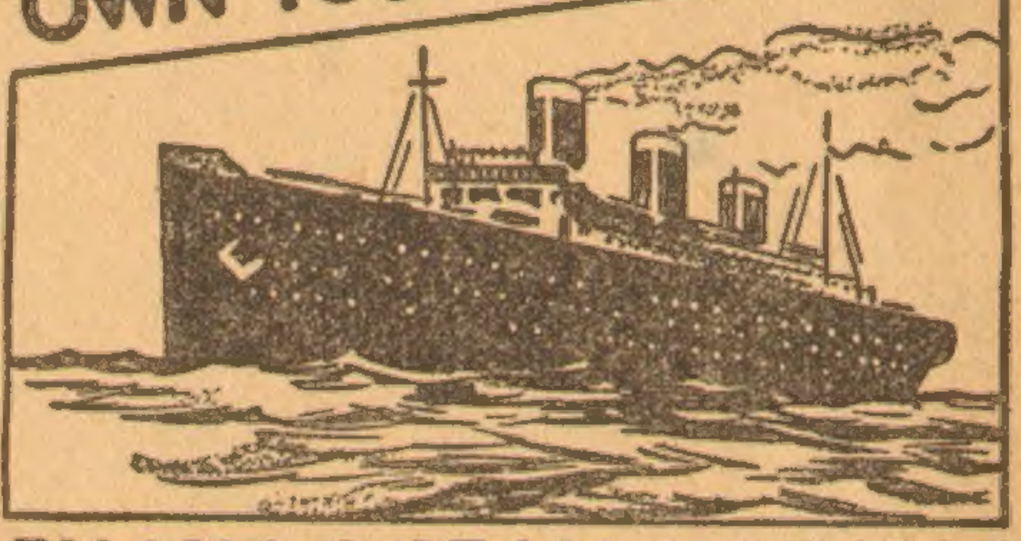

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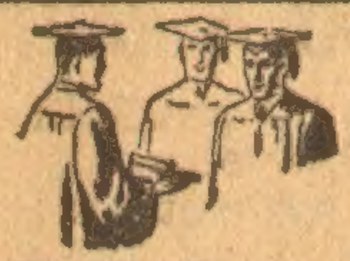

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ROARING

Seated upon the rearing horse, Gard whipped

CHAPTER I

Gun Talk

THE Red Hoods had kept their sinister promise! From the crest of Bald Butte, where he had climbed to look for strayed stock, Gard Runyan saw the holocaust against the horizon.

Riding like the wind on his black and white mottled pinto, Rags, in a few minutes he reached the charred desolation of what had been his home.

As he gazed upon the smoldering ruins of his Sleepy UJ ranch buildings, the glowing embers of the fire were no hotter than the flames in his grey eyes.

Twining the slender steel-corded fingers of his right hand about the butt of his six-gun, where it hung in a well-worn holster at his hip, Gard Runyan swore that he would not stop until the last Red Hood was wiped out and Vanishing River made safe for the ranchers who lived there.

Gard Runyan, Despoiled of His Spread by the Red

SIX-GUNS

By RUSSELL A. BANKSON

Author of "Bitter Grass," etc.

his own gun into the fellow's face and fired

"They'll pay for that in blood, every one of 'em!"

Though Rags had sped across the badlands until the white lather and alkali dust had coated his glossy body with dull grey, and his muscles trembled beneath the weight upon his back, Gard relentlessly turned the pony toward the south. In the distance the little rangeland cow-town of Red Dot, Montana, stood like a wart upon the floor of the Inchelium basin.

Nor did he pause until he drew rein before the squat frame building wedged between the general mercantile store and the Crazy Ike saloon which served as Jasper Lawton's private bank and his town office.

Stepping through the open doorway, Gard Runyan looked levelly across the top of a cluttered desk at the man he had come to see.

Jasper Lawton was a big man in more ways than one. Physically, he was almost a giant, with broad, square shoulders and a big head upon them. His face was flat and

Hood Killers, Swings into Quick-Trigger Action!

Squinty Shadrow

wide, and mottled red in the heat of the midsummer day. His eyes were far apart and they had a way of looking unblinkingly at whatever object they were focused upon. His was a poker face, masking cunning thoughts that no one ever yet had been able to read.

But greater than his hulking form was his power in the Inchelium country. The town of Red Dot was his—lock, stock and barrel. The whole of the Inchelium basin range for a hundred square miles was controlled by him, and other ranchers existed there only as they paid the tribute which he demanded. Most of the desert badlands to the north were his, too, when he chose to make use of them.

The exception was a narrow valley running through there for a distance of fifty miles, following the meanderings of Vanishing River. Along this ancient dry water course were seepings from the lost stream which had dropped to a new channel beneath the desert. At these watering holes were located the small cattle spreads of the score or more ranchers of the Vanishing River country, the total value of which was not worth the trouble of conquest and seizure.

That is, they had not seemed to be worth it until six months before, when a menacing band of night riders swooped down upon the isolated ranches. These men wore red hoods over their heads to conceal their identities, and they spread terror the length of the old river course, ordering the settlers to get out.

Gard Runyan was one of these settlers, owning the Sleepy UJ spread at the head of Vanishing River. Young, fearless, and reputed to be the swiftest on the draw of any man in all the Inchelium country, Gard defied the Red Hoods and checked the panic which immediately seized upon his neighbors.

"They got a good reason for doin' this," he urged. "That's what we got to find out. If Vanishin' River's worth that much trouble to them, it's worth more to us folks. How many'll stick it out with me?"

Every Vanishing River rancher stayed. Then things began to happen. Buildings and hay-stacks were burned; watering holes were poisoned; stock was scattered through the badlands where it could never be recovered.

AND still the purpose behind this ruthless conquest remained an unfathomed mystery.

With bitter thoughts in his brain and death in his heart, Gard stood inside the office of the man he believed to be responsible for all his troubles. His long arms dangled loosely at his sides, and his glittering grey eyes gave the only life to a lean, square-jawed face that seemed moulded out of bronze.

Jasper Lawton started to drop a big hand beneath the desk, when he looked up and saw who his caller was. Before the act had been completed, he changed his mind.

Gard Runyan nodded approval.

"Yuh ain't often been that clos't to dyin'!"

"Who're you?" the cattleman-merchant-banker demanded.

"Make a guess!"

The big man wet his thick lips with his tongue and swallowed. The red splotches on his face were turning purple.

"What's this nonsense about anyhow?" he rumbled.

"Yuh know me well enough! An' yuh know why I'm here."

"D'y think yuh can come into my town an' git away with any high-handed talk like that?"

"Maybe it'ud help things if I said I was Gard Runyan from up yonder on Vanishin' River."

"Heard tell of yuh. A smart-alec, ain't yuh? I don't never take that kind o' sass from nobody."

"I ain't said hardly anything—yet."

"What yuh aim tuh do?"

"Kill you!"

Jasper Lawton's eyes never blinked. They were like an owl's. He started to get up, then sat back heavily in his chair.

"Yuh're loco!" he wheezed. "I don't any more'n know who yuh are."

"Ever hear tell of the Red Hoods?"

"A BAND o' bloody outlaws that ought to be strung up!"

"That's a fine speech, comin' from the boss Red Hood, Lawton! Now ain't it a nice 'sprise, me knowin' that? Well, you Red Hoods burned me out this mornin'. An' now I'm goin' to kill you!"

"For gawd's sake, Runyan, use some sense! Yuh're plumb crazy. Them Red Hoods has got me worried like blazes, rustlin' my stock on me."

"That's a lie! I lost everything I had this mornin', an' the rest o' the folks on Vanishin' River's wiped out. I'm settlin' for all of us."

Gard Runyan

"What yuh want?"

"I'll give yuh a choice. Pay for everything we lost, cash on the line, or else—"

"Yeah? What?"

Gard patted the butt of his gun.

JASPER LAWTON wiped beads of perspiration from his blank face with the back of his hairy hand.

"I don't want Vanishin' River for no price. An' all them Red Hoods want it fer is so's they kin run my rustled stock through there without bein' bothered."

"You ain't buyin' it, an' that's only a stall. All yuh're doin' is payin' us for what we lost, an' we keep our places."

"I ain't goin' to be held up an' robbed. Now get outta here!"

Lawton had courage. He was a good shot. In his day he had cut plenty of notches on the wooden stock of his six-gun, riding in the thick of range wars, rustlers' raids and uprisings among those who paid tribute to him. He scowled unblinkingly at the younger man.

Gard's grey eyes now were like

Sheriff Slow Polk

steel points, behind the narrowed slits of his lids.

"I reckon yuh better pay—*pronto!*"

Death was creeping closer to Lawton. He saw it, and to save his life he began to hedge.

"I'll buy out the whole bunch of yuh an' yuh kin all get outta there."

"We ain't movin', I told yuh!"

"I—I'll settle fer what yuh lost."

"That's better—for your skin. What's yore offer?"

"What the stuff's worth, which ain't much."

"A hundred thousand, cold cash. I got my saddle-bags outside to carry it away in."

Jasper Lawton swore heavily.

"That's highway robbery," he growled. "I'll be hanged if I'll pay it!"

"Yuh'll be dead if yuh don't!"

"I ain't got that much."

Once more Gard's eyelids were narrowed slits through which twin flames of fire leaped.

"That's a lie! Yuh always got a couple million piled 'round this dump of you'n, so I reckon yuh'll pay. Yuh see, us folks has done a heap o' worryin' on account o' you an' yore Red Hoods, an' that's got to be took into consideration in this settlement."

For once in his domineering, ruthless life, Jasper Lawton seemed to have backed into a corner.

"If I turn over the money, yuh got to sign papers givin' Vanishin' River to me," he temporized.

"I ain't signin' nothin'. This is for what's already happened."

"Here, then, give me a receipt for the money," Lawton insisted. "That ain't only plain business."

He leaned forward over his desk and shoved his right hand in among the litter of papers. His flat face was like a death mask, but his pale eyes glittered malignantly.

"Yuh scoundrel!" he roared suddenly. "Put up yore hands! An' get 'em high before I spatter yore brains agin the wall! Nobody ain't never got away with anything like that with Jasper Lawton an' stayed alive. Yore game won't work, because we got a necktie court here in Red Dot for such as you."

Out of the pile of papers Lawton's hand came with a gun. The sun wrinkles on Gard Runyan's face deepened into a mirthless grin. With a twitch of his dangling right arm, he fired from the hip before the older man could press the trigger.

LAWTON'S weapon, ripped from his clutch by the impact of Gard's bullet, went spinning across the floor, as the ruler of the Inchelium seized his numbed fingers in fear that they had been blown off.

Gard heard men running toward the building, at the report of the shot.

"It's that Runyan from Vanishin' River!" someone shouted.

"Git him! He's killed the boss!"

A bullet zipped through the crown of Gard's hat. He felt the hot lead close to his scalp. An inch lower and he would have been dead. With the agility of a cat, still with his

gun covering Jasper Lawton, he leaped to one side, planting his back against the wall.

From this point of vantage he could watch Lawton and at the same time see the open doorway and the street beyond. Two of Lawton's gunmen were rushing the entrance. Gard's quick movement had thrown them off their aim.

Swinging his gun with lightning speed, Gard fired twice. The two men pitched forward, dead.

Each was drilled through the forehead.

Two gunmen were dead, but pandemonium had broken loose in the street of Red Dot. Jasper Lawton's men were belching forth from every saloon, coming on the run, dragging out their guns.

They were surrounding the bank building, closing in on Gard. Out in the middle of the street, at a slanting angle, Gard saw a killer raise a rifle and lay the stock against cheek. He had a bead on Gard. The young Vanishing River rancher flipped his gun upward. There were twin roars as the rifle spoke and the six-gun in Gard's hand answered.

The rifle bullet seared a streak across Gard's shoulder. The man in the street pitched forward, a shapeless, inert mass in the red dust.

THE mob outside the door dared not start blasting because their big boss was inside, and their bullets would mow him down along with Gard.

The cornered rancher slid along the wall until he was standing behind Lawton.

Over Lawton's shoulder he leveled the weapon at the menacing crowd outside. To the banker he said, sharply:

"You'n me's goin' to march outta here!"

He lowered the muzzle of the gun and pressed it deep into the big cattleman's back. "Start movin'! Tell them wolves to back outta the way, an' then head straight through that door!"

Jasper Lawton

Lawton waved his hands, motioning his henchmen back. Then he took a step forward.

Crowding and pushing his way through the milling throng came a man. Where the two dead gunmen lay across the threshold, he stopped.

"I'm here, boss!" this man calmly announced.

His hands were at his sides, but there was death in his evil face.

CHAPTER II

Gard Collects

THE man standing in the doorway was Squinty Shadrow, general superintendent of all of Lawton's Diamond Bar holdings.

He was a mean *hombre* with one squint eye, two yellowed fangs that pushed his upper lip out so that it hung over his chin like a shelter-half, and sun-bleached straw hair. A killer, every inch of him. A ruthless slaughterer who had no compunction against taking human life. And a man

with a reputation for swift drawing. It was said of Squinty Shadrow that he would let the devil himself make the first draw, and then plug him through the center of his horned head before the old boy could press the trigger.

Squinty Shadrow pushed up to where the two dead men lay. He did not even glance at them. But out of his twisted eyes he took in the scene at the back of the room where Gard Runyan kept his gun against Lawton.

"What's up, boss?" he asked the cattle king with a casualness that could not be mistaken.

Gard prodded the muzzle of his gun deeper. Lawton winced.

"Speak up!" said Gard. "Tell him to mind his own business!"

Jasper Lawton looked steadily at his superintendent, and though his face was unreadable, some understanding passed between them.

"Nothin', Squinty. Not a thing," he answered slowly. "I'm just buyin' out the Vanishin' River range. I'm payin' cash for it. That shootin' was a accident. Now clear outta here an take that mob with yuh."

Squinty Shadrow gave Gard a hard look. These two had faced each other before. Each knew the reputation of the other on the draw, and each was more than a little jealous of the fame which had accrued to the other. Still, they had never come to a test. They had never actually stood up and drawn against each other.

SQUINTY'S hands still dangled at his sides, but he was reluctant to obey orders.

"Sure yuh mean that?"

"My Gawd, have I got tuh draw a map o' the whole route to Vanishin' River for yuh?" Lawton growled.

At that the range boss nodded his head. "I git yuh, boss."

"Clear out that mess in the doorway," Lawton ordered. "Looks like yuh'd hire some boys that knowed how tuh handle their shootin' irons." That was all the sympathy that was wasted on three dead gunmen.

Shadrow backed away a few steps. His ugly face turned toward Gard; and he looked at the younger man with deadly hate while he spoke to the wolves about him, out of the corner of his mouth.

"Yuh heard. Drag 'em away," he snarled.

WHEN the entrance was cleared, Shadrow stood there alone, still facing the tableau of death inside.

"They'll be a bunch o' us boys sorta hangin' 'round outside," he sneered at Gard, significantly.

"I'll be right glad t' meet up with yuh," Gard answered evenly. "Now, git outta here."

He jerked his head toward the street and Squinty backed the rest of the way out, his evil eyes still menacing the younger man.

When the room was all clear and they were alone again, Jasper Lawton twisted his head over onto his shoulder and wiped his face on his shirt.

"Gawd, I'm glad that's over with!" he rumbled.

"What yuh mean by such?" Gard demanded, still pressing the gun deeply into the small of the other's back.

"When them renegades taste blood, they don't know when tuh stop."

"'Fraid they'd mess you up along with me, eh?"

Lawton did not answer this. Instead, he asked:

"Kin I put my hands down, Runyan? Yuh got me dead center."

"Go ahead. Only don't make no slip. I'm collectin' that bill now."

The cattleman seemed almost cheerful as he dropped his hands to his sides and let the blood get circulated in them again. His mood

Swinging his gun with lightning speed, Gard fired twice

was too cheerful, under the circumstances. Gard was suspicious and wary, watching every move he made. He had never heard anything good of Lawton, and he was not going to be caught off guard.

Lawton turned his wide, blank face toward him.

"You win, young feller. Yuh got the nerve of a wildcat."

Gards grim face did not relax.

"I ain't bein' paid in compliments," he reminded. "Cash is what talks."

The big man bent over the door of a safe that was built into the wall of the building beside the desk. He turned the knobs with his massive hands and jerked the door back. Gard stood where he could look into the safe, and where he could watch every move that Lawton made.

Inside were piles of currency, stacks of gold and many well-filled canvas money bags. From the currency, the despot of the Inchelium counted off many bills of large denomination and placed them on the desk. "I want some o' that gold, too." Gard insisted.

Obediently, Lawton set two of

the canvas bags on the desk. "There's five thousand in each one of 'em," he explained monotonously.

"Let's see it," Runyan demanded, suspiciously.

The older man opened the bags. They were filled with nuggets of raw, yellow gold, just as it had come from the earth in the cradles and sluices of placer miners. And swiftly Gard recalled tales of banditry on the gold trails in the high mountains to the west.

"Where'd yuh git that stuff?" he questioned sharply.

"None o' yore business. It's gold, an' that's what yuh asked fer."

"I'll take mine minted." Giving him raw gold might be a clever trap into which the foxy Jasper Lawton hoped to plunge him. It might easily lead to charges that Gard was involved in its theft.

Lawton shrugged indifferently, put the sacks back into the safe and counted out ten thousand dollars in golden eagles. He dropped the lot into an empty pouch, straightened up.

He was almost jovial.

"There yuh are. Every blamed dollar. An' I hope it chokes yuh."

Gard set his thin lips in a straight line and jerked the muzzle of his gun toward the door.

"Load it up," he snapped.

IN an ominous silence, Lawton carried the money outside and stowed it away in the saddle-bags, under Gard's watchful eyes. Then, when the job was finished, the big man stood to one side, waiting for further orders. There was a strange submissive meekness in this action that had Gard worried, though he did not let it show.

"Stand where yuh are a spell," he curtly instructed. His face was flushed with triumph now, as he thought of the fortune in his possession.

But had he taken the trouble to look, he would have seen that Jasper Lawton's dead pan was as expressionless as a wooden post, which was a bad sign.

Across Red Dot's dusty street, opposite the bank, Squinty Shadrow loitered on the sidewalk, watching proceedings from beneath the lowered brim of his black sombrero. Others of Jasper Lawton's killers were planted along the street, at advantageous points. They were visible, lounging in doorways and on the sidewalk. And they all had their faces turned toward the two who stood beside the mottled pinto.

DOWN that street Gard had to travel, between those rows of bristling guns. And in all of Red Dot there was not a friend who would dare to raise a gun in his defense.

He glanced the length of the thoroughfare. Men were shifting in their tracks, getting ready.

Suddenly Gard thought that he got the significance of the whole play. At a signal from Lawton they would close in on him. He stepped up close to the other again, and laid his gun against him.

"Yuh're takin' a little walk," he said, looking him in the eyes.

"Is this goin' to be kidnapin', too?"

"It's goin' to be lead poisonin' in the brain if anybody moves. So, if I was yuh, I'd see they didn't."

"They won't," Lawton rumbled.

Gard Runyan gathered up the reins, and, with Jasper Lawton marching stiffly before him, he led the money-burdened Rags directly across the street toward the Diamond Bar superintendent.

An ominous, heavy silence had fallen over Red Dot. Death was lurking everywhere. Men had already died there that day, with hot lead from Gard Runyan's blazing gun. He was a marked man among

these hired gunmen of the great and powerful Jasper Lawton. He had been in a tight place when he shot. Gard had never wantonly or willingly taken human life, had never killed unless it was to save his own or someone else's life.

But that did not make him the less certain of paying the price which these killers would demand—a life for a life.

Squinty Shadrow was the chief killer. He was the man who led Jasper Lawton's hounds of hell, when they went after new range in the Inchelium, or when they decided that some hapless cattle raiser had overstepped bounds. Squinty was the one with whom, eventually, Gard would have to settle the score in a burst of blazing lead. But right now these other slinking wolves had to be held in abeyance until he had traversed that street.

But Gard had been in tight places before. He knew that Shadrow was waiting, the way a cougar waits to pounce upon its prey. So he took Jasper Lawton with him.

Once across the street, and face to face with the killer, the youthful rancher from the Vanishing River country assumed an attitude of studied nonchalance. Indifferently he built himself a pill with his left hand, while he insolently sized up the squint-eyed range boss from head to foot.

WHEN he had the pill rolled and sealed with the tip of his tongue, he found a match in the breast pocket of his shirt and snapped it into flame with his thumb nail. Inhaling deeply, his eyelids cut down to slits, he spoke finally.

"If yuh an' the rest o' the Red Hoods wants yore big boss to keep on livin' an' payin' yore wages," he announced, "yuh'll all fold yore arms acrost yore chests an' keep 'em there."

Squinty opened his bum eye and shifted his hand ever so slightly toward his gun. It was a tense moment.

"Gosh, Squinty, have some sense," Lawton croaked.

"An' don't," Gard cut in ominously, "let yore fingers have no foolish notions."

The range boss let his hand drop and spat contemptuously into the dust at his feet.

"D'y allow yuh'll git away with it?"

Gard motioned Lawton to climb into the saddle of a horse standing a few feet away at the hitching rail. Then he himself swung lightly up across the saddle on Rags, and, looking down at the wolfish Shadrow, answered him.

"I have. *Adios!*"

CHAPTER III

Red Hoods

RIDING out of town knee to knee with the flat-faced, wordless ruler of the Inchelium, gun in hand, Gard missed nothing. But nowhere along the course was there any move made to stop them. They went to the end of the street, and turned off into Mud Gulch, leaving Red Dot behind.

Once they were clear of gun-fire, Gard halted.

"Much obliged to yuh," he said, curtly dismissing his bodyguard.

"Go t' the devil!" Jasper Lawton sputtered. His face was splotched with purple as he swung back into town.

The high tension which had gripped Gard left him, and he relaxed in the saddle, letting Rags set his own pace along a trail that would take him by the most direct route to where the men of his clan, the Vanishing River ranchers, could

be signaled to gather at the rendezvous with all haste. This secret meeting place had been established after the coming of the Red Hoods, and there Gard could divide up the spoils which he had forced Jasper Lawton to pay over to him.

He had carried through his daring bluff against the all-powerful leader. Even yet he could scarcely believe that he had gone into Red Dot, gotten what he demanded and come away alive. The presence of the money in his saddle-bags, however, reassured him. He had it, and he would pay the ranchers of Vanishing River for everything they had lost.

Still, he reflected, he had not gotten at the root of the trouble which had beset himself and his neighbors. He had not solved the mystery about Vanishing River. He had gained nothing toward learning why such desperate means were being used to drive a handful of already starving cattle raisers out of a section of the badlands that was scarcely worth possessing.

And until he knew the answer to that question, he was certain that all their troubles would continue to mount in size.

Deep in speculation, he came in the middle of the afternoon, to the mouth of Deadman's Canyon and pushed in between the perpendicular rock walls, where the shadows were already beginning to gather.

THEN, almost upon him, there rose a horse and rider to block his way, sending Rags plunging back on his haunches in fright.

Drawn over this rider's head and down onto his shoulders was a scarlet red hood, with a cowl completely shielding his face except where his eyes peered through two narrow slits. In his hands he held a snub-nosed carbine rifle, covering Gard. And behind this gunman, choking the narrow canyon, were other Red Hoods.

Gard saw in a flash that he was trapped, and without hesitation he raised his hands above his head. Then he remembered the fortune which he was packing—money which was not his alone, but belonged also to his desperate neighbors, and he almost lost his life. He started to lower his hands in defense of that wealth.

IN time he saw the finger of the Red Hood leader closing in on the trigger and he put his arms back in place.

"That's better!" said the gunman. He talked thickly, as though to disguise his voice.

His first surprise over, Gard had a better prospectus of things now. His brain was functioning coolly, calmly, reasoning the whole thing out. That voice! In spite of the effort to cover it up, he knew he had heard it before, not so long since. And how had these roving Red Hoods been appraised so quickly that he was carrying a hundred thousand dollars with him on this particular trail?

Reason told him that they could easily have been in Red Dot when he left, and have ridden out of there by another trail, coming at breakneck speed to Deadman's Canyon to cut him off while Rags loitered along the way.

All in the swift moment while he waited for the next command from his captors, he began to recall certain things that had been said in Red Dot, but had had no significance then.

He remembered that when Squinty Shadrow had come into the bank, Lawton had said to him that he was buying the Vanishing River holdings—for cash. And when Shadrow had questioned further, Lawton had asked whether he had to draw a

map of the whole route to Vanishing River. And then, what was it Shadrow had said to Gard on the street? "D'y think yuh'll git away with it?"

The Red Hood leader spoke again.

"Slide outta yore saddle an' shove yore face agin the cliff-wall!"

Gard was fairly sure of the voice now. Sure enough to make a bluff.

"Think yuh'll get away with it, Shadrow?" he taunted.

The muzzle of the carbine did not waver. Gard swung down to the rocky floor of the canyon, obeying orders, while the Red Hoods crowded forward, surrounding Rags. Out of the corner of his eye, with his hands still high above his head, Gard saw that one of them was keeping him covered, while the leader was ripping the saddle-bags from Rags and draping them across his own horse.

The whole thing occupied no more than a moment of time.

"Let's git outta here," one of them called.

"I got some bizness with this bird," the leader growled. Gard was more certain than ever that the voice belonged to Squinty Shadrow.

THE fellow rode over and crowded his pony up against Gard, drawing Gard's gun from its holster and tossing it away among the rocks a dozen feet distant. Then he leaned over.

"Yuh got a chance t' save yore neck," he snarled. "Lead us t' the hide-out where the Vanishin' River ranchers is stayin'. Say yuh'll do it while I count ten."

Gard turned his head then, and looked up into the hooded face.

"Like I told yuh before, yuh an' your Red Hoods can go t' the devil!"

The muzzle of the carbine flashed upward and was pressed against Gard's head. There was a deafening report that roared and rumbled along Deadman's Canyon, and a blinding flash of powder that seared his flesh. Gard had been warned in time, though, and with the perfect co-ordination of his muscles, he had twisted his head to one side.

The blood spurted from his neck, his knees buckled under him and he fell limply to the ground in a motionless, shapeless heap.

ABOVE him, the leader of the Red Hoods hurled a curse, and other members of the bloody band laughed harshly. Then they stirred their horses to action, milling about, getting under way.

Gard Runyan dared to open his eyes. He saw the group crowding toward the mouth of the canyon. They still had their red hoods over their heads, but Gard got glimpses of the brands on the left shoulders of several of the ponies they were riding. Diamond Bars! The property of Jasper Lawton!

Gard had let his body go limp even as the muzzle of the carbine was pressed against his head, and had slumped to the ground as though the bullet had killed him instantly. His acting had been good enough to fool the group of Red Hoods. In spite of this, though, he knew that he was badly wounded.

Just how bad it was, he couldn't say. The blood was spurting from his neck, but he could twist his head about, and he could think clearly.

The riders were getting further away from him. He sat up and put a hand over the jagged wound. From his hasty investigation he decided that the steel-cased bullet had severed a small vein in the fleshy part of his neck. If he had not twisted his head at the right instant, it would have crashed into the base of his skull. That, evidently, was what the gunman thought he had succeeded in doing.

Using a bandanna for wadding,

Gard stuffed it into the wound to check the flow of blood. Then he got to his feet and staggered over to where he had seen the Red Hood leader toss his gun. He found it without trouble.

"Come here, ol' boy," he called softly to Rags, who had not been molested. The pinto came and stood beside him.

Gard was beginning to feel dizzy in the head from loss of blood and from the pain of the nasty wound. With difficulty he managed to throw a leg over the saddle.

"Run 'em down, baby!" he said to Rags.

Holding his wound and the reins with one hand, he gripped the wooden butt of his six-gun with the other, and sped swiftly out of the canyon, in the wake of the retreating Red Hoods.

Coming into the open, he saw them turn into a ravine that cut in at right angles. They were not yet aware that he had stirred, or was after them. Already they were shedding their red hoods, stuffing them into their pockets.

The only thought that beat on Gard's feverish brain was that they had robbed him of his money, and he had to get it back.

WAVERING in the saddle, with his head whirling and things beginning to go black around him, he touched Rags' flanks with the rowels of his spurs.

"Git 'em, baby!" he pleaded.

Wheeling into the ravine, he hazily saw the riders ahead of him. They were at long range for a six-gun, but one of them lagged behind.

"Put up yore hands!" Gard shouted. "I got yuh covered!"

So unexpected was the command that the group of riders involuntarily raised their hands above their heads. Then they turned in their saddles. The one who had been lagging behind was close enough for Gard to recognize now, with his red hood off.

He was a fellow named Slim Tucker, an imported gunman, riding for Lawton's Diamond Bar.

Tucker jerked his gun out then and fired point blank, when he saw Gard Runyan reel in the saddle. But Gard, with his head whirling faster and faster, caught the move and pressed the trigger of his own weapon.

SLIM TUCKER pitched headlong from the saddle, a wail of terror in his throat, and landed shapelessly on the ground.

Behind him a man threw up a rifle and blazed away. The bullet, coming like the swift flight of a hornet, creased Gard's scalp, and cleared his head for an instant with the sharp, burning pain. He straightened up and emptied his gun at the mass of riders. He saw one of them grab his shoulder; and another one doubled over in his saddle, holding his stomach before he slid to the ground beneath his pony's plunging feet.

Two of them were accounted for. But still there were four more of them. And dizzy blackness was sweeping over Gard again, in sickening waves. He managed to feed fresh shells into his gun and start pumping it, but every time he pressed the trigger he knew that he was shooting wild.

Return lead now was whining all about him. A bullet nipped a bite out of his thigh. He saw and heard the messengers of death slamming against the rocky walls on either side of him.

The four gunmen up ahead were coming toward him. Vaguely he knew that they were rushing him, pouring death out of their blazing guns. Rags let out a piteous squeal of pain. A bullet had found the

sturdy pinto. He was wounded. But it was only a flesh wound.

"Looks—like — the — finish, baby," Gard said to the pony, the words spilling out from between his swollen and bleeding lips.

He raised the gun and pulled the trigger again. By a miracle, the bullet went true to its mark, and the man in the lead of the charging forces raised up in his stirrups then spun groundward, while his pony wheeled and went charging back up the ravine.

But the three who were left were not stopped. They were coming on again, full speed, and they were shooting with more deadly aim.

Gard flung himself from his saddle behind a large boulder and crouched there while he reloaded his gun.

Then he leveled it over the top of the boulder. But before he could pull the trigger, it was torn from his grasp by the impact of a rifle ball that plowed along his arm to the elbow.

He was a bleeding, gory mess. His first neck wound was still running blood. He had long since abandoned the bandanna plug which had checked the first heavy flow. And he was aching and bleeding from half a dozen other minor wounds. Painfully he recovered the gun from the ground. And then the pin snapped on an empty shell!

GARD was through. He couldn't load again. Everything was going black. He couldn't see the riders charging toward him now. He could only dimly make out the terrified Rags, hovering over him.

"S'long, ol' pal," he mumbled thickly.

Then he heard a shout from down the ravine behind him. Momentary consciousness cleared the cobwebs from his head, strengthening his vision. Men were coming on horseback. A dozen or more of them. They were charging up the ravine at full speed. And they were blasting away with their guns.

He was caught between two groups of gunmen, trapped like a coyote.

CHAPTER IV

Counter Plot

GARD could never remember having been so weary —so utterly exhausted in brain and body — in his whole life. It seemed that the weight of a thousand tons of rock was pressing down on him, and that a devil was standing on his head, jabbing red-hot pitchforks deep into his brain.

He stirred, opened his eyes and rolled them about. He was moving, with a rolling motion, and that was what was making him ache so. It was night, he comprehended, for a moon was shining.

Then slow reason told him that he was astride a horse that was moving in a slow walk, giving the roll to his body.

With this information digested, he managed to raise his head and look about him. There were other riders on both sides of him, and in front. They were all keeping that slow pace with him. There must be a dozen of them.

As though a door were suddenly opened, a flood of recollections poured in on Gard. He remembered the whole thing now. The holdup by the Red Hoods in Deadman's Canyon. The shooting. The pursuit up the ravine. The grim battle in which he had dropped three of the charging Red Hoods before they overwhelmed him with their withering fire.

And at last he recalled the final straw, the coming of the re-inforce-

ments up the ravine behind him, when he was already through.

So the Red Hoods had taken him captive instead of killing him? They must want to know where the secret rendezvous of the Vanishing River folks was, pretty bad. And they had the money. Gard wondered why they couldn't let him die in peace, and have it over with.

The cool night winds of the badlands were soothing to his burning skin. He raised a hand to push his sombrero back off his forehead. The act revealed new pains in his arms. He *was* badly shot up. But he could see better.

He raised his head and looked carefully about him. One of the riders who was close beside him, supporting his body so that it would not slide from the saddle, took a quick glance at him, and shouted, "Hey!" to attract the attention of the others.

"Yuh won't get nothin' outta me, yuh rotten Red Hoods!" Gard said, thickly. "Might's well finish me up."

"Hey, Gard!" said the voice of the other rider. "Yuh comin' 'round?"

There was something strongly familiar about that voice. Gard thought of Squinty Shadrow. But that wasn't it. He took a closer inspection of the face that was leaning toward him.

"BILL BRADSHAW!" he muttered. A surge of happy relief poured through his sore body. He felt better, stronger. Then he wasn't a captive in the hands of the Red Hoods! This fellow was Bill Bradshaw, his neighbor from the Circle Dot up Vanishing River a piece.

"Shore! Who'd yuh think it was playin' wet nurse t' yuh here, yuh ol' shorthorn?" Bill said to him.

"What'd they do, Bill?" Gard asked, as the others, all ranchers of Vanishing River, crowded about.

"We got part o' the story, but it wasn't enough t' make sense, Gard," spoke up Jim Piper of the Bridle Bit. "We been on the lookout fer yuh all day, ever since we seen yore buildin's go up in smoke. We reckoned yuh took the trail after the yaller skunks what done it, but why yuh come int' that ravine with that bunch o' lead-slingers a-roarin' at yuh, we ain't figgered."

IN a few words Gard gave them the facts. He told them about the hundred thousand dollars which he had collected from Jasper Lawton, and the certainty he felt that it had been Lawton who had double-crossed him, not only recovering the money, but leaving him for dead in Deadman's Canyon.

"I guess you boys showed up jest in time," he added. "Did yuh git the money back?"

"Naw, on the money," Bill said disgustedly. "But we shore wa'nt none too soon on gittin' int' that ravine. Boy, yuh was up t' yore ears in trouble; though from what we seen, yuh done a good job of accountin' with that smoke rod yuh pack."

"Yeah," put in Joe Jenkins of the Lazy YY. "When we come foggin' in there, they grabbed their dead, throwed 'em acrost empty saddles, an' went outta there like a sky-line blizzard. We didn't try t' foller 'em through, after pickin' yuh up."

In a secluded basin lined with perpendicular lava walls, about two miles from where Gard's Sleepy UJ had stood, the whole cavalcade halted. Two of the men climbed up on the shelf land above, where they slid their ponies into cracks in the rocks. They could not be seen from any angle, yet were so stationed that the two riders had a commanding view of every approach to the basin.

At the sound of the nighthawk, repeated three times by them, the signal that all was clear, Bill Brad-

shaw led the procession in single file down a long, steep crevice, where the cliff had been split open on one side of the basin.

Into the inky blackness the horses pitched without fear, having traversed the course many times before. At the bottom of the pitch, a distance of perhaps fifty feet, the crevice made a sharp right-angle break, into which the riders moved. The walls were so close together that there were places where the riders had to lift their feet from the stirrups to squeeze through.

Winding and twisting, the course kept leading deeper into the earth, and further back under the cliff, until presently they came into a large, high-ceilinged chamber. Here lanterns which were hanging ready were lighted; and it was found that they had come into an underground stable, well stocked with a large supply of hay which had been smuggled in by the Vanishing River ranchers.

Here the horses were stripped and tied.

Out of this chamber the men moved on foot into another passage. Bill Bradshaw and Jim Piper helped Gard, who found it hard to walk. But they hadn't far to go before they were in another dark chamber. Giving the call of the nighthawk, they were answered immediately from somewhere ahead in the blackness, and moved along still another subterranean tunnel that twisted and turned, until they stepped at last into the largest underground cavern of all, one with a high ceiling, and apparently extending for a great distance.

IN here were scattered many lanterns and oil lamps. Several small fires of smokeless mesquite were burning brightly, giving the place the appearance of a great encampment at night. Persons were moving about, and the voices of women and children were heard, as greetings were extended to the men who were returning from their foray in the outside world.

Here, then, was the secret rendezvous of the Vanishing River ranchers, where they had concentrated their supplies and their families, so that they would be safe from the bloody killers who rode the Vanishing River country with red hoods over their heads.

THESE subterranean caverns and their entrance here, as well as two other secret entrances at widely different points, to be used in emergencies, had been discovered years before by Gard Runyan. He had kept knowledge of them to himself until recently, when there had been urgent need for such a hide-out for his neighbors and himself.

Altogether gathered here were twenty men, seven of whom had their wives and children there as well.

The air in the caverns was fresh and pure in spite of the fires, as the smoke was wafted upward and away. And the answer to this was found close at hand, where the black waters of Vanishing River flowed along a deep, broad channel. It came from no one knew where, and went on beneath the floor of the desert, feeding the watering holes of the ranches on the surface, and emerging far away, beyond the desert badlands, as a surface river again.

But down here was the new level to which the ancient river had fallen when it left the surface, leaving behind it the shell of its old course, which had become the Vanishing River of the badlands.

The wife of one of the ranchers took charge of Gard Runyan when he was brought into the light, and for three nights and days after that she stayed beside him, nursing him

through the crisis of the fever which followed.

During this time, while he was delirious and hope for his recovery faltered, the other ranchers kept their look-out posts for sight of the return of the Red Hoods. Some foraged for more food, and even rode into Red Dot to pick up what information they could.

News was not reassuring. Gard Runyan was wanted for murder. Jasper Lawton had issued orders that he be apprehended and tried for the killing of the men he had been forced to shoot down to save his own life while he was in Red Dot. Not only that, but every resident of Red Dot and the surrounding Inchelium basin, all of them Lawton's men, had been deputized with orders to shoot Gard on sight. The whole country was stirred up over the affair in town.

In addition, Gard was charged with boldly riding into town and holding up Jasper Lawton at the point of a gun, robbing him of a hundred thousand dollars.

Still, during all this time, no further sign was had of the Red Hoods. Since Gard's disastrous encounter with the band who had robbed him of the fortune in Deadman's Canyon, they seemed to have disappeared into total oblivion. Apparently they had been disrupted enough to lie low for a time.

IN town, to augment the force of the regularly elected sheriff, Slow Polk, Jasper Lawton's range superintendent, Squinty Shadrow, was named as leader of the possemen who were searching for Gard Runyan.

On the afternoon of the fourth day Gard sat up, his eyes clear again, the fog swept away from his brain. He was still weak, but he recalled all of the events which had passed.

"I'm headin' down tuh Red Dot an' take that money away from Jasper Lawton again," he declared. "If him an' his dirty Red Hoods think they kin get away with that, they got a surprise comin'."

"Hold up!" cautioned Bill Bradshaw. "Mebbe yuh got the wrong slant on this yere Red Hood bizness. Joe Jenkins was down t' town this mornin', an' hell's shore 'nough poppin'."

"What's the matter?" Gard demanded.

"Go ahead an' tell him, Joe," Bill Bradshaw said.

"IT'S like this, Gard," Joe said uneasily. "Red Dot's like a volcano. I reckon yuh got the wrong twist on them Red Hoods, like Bill says. They ain't no kin t' Jasper Lawton. Night 'fore last, they up an' raided that ol' Bow'n Arrer spread on Chimmickin Crick which is owned by Jasper Lawton hisself.

"They burned the place out, stampeded a bunch o' steers over the cliff int' the gorge, robbed a dozen er more waddies in the bunkhouses o' their season's pay, an' then hi-tailed it fer the upper reaches o' Vanishin' River. If they was Lawton's men, they wouldn't be strikin' at him, I figger."

"Yes, but what's that got to do with us?" Gard demanded sharply.

Jim Piper spoke up.

"Lawton's ravin' mad, an' he's gittin' ever'body in the Inchelium stirred up agin us folks, on account o' them waddies which was robbed at the Bow'n Arrer, swearin' it was yuh that was leadin' them Red Hoods, an' that they recognized some o' the rest o' us from Vanishin' River.

"Now the order's gone out fer tuh grab any of us Vanishin' River folks an' t' drag us int' Red Dot fer trial, with a big reward on our heads. Joe didn't feel none too

easy, figgerin' somebody'd recognize him any minnit, an' he got outta there fast's he could."

In spite of his physical weakness, Gard Runyan leaped to his feet.

"The dirty, lyin', stealin' murderin' polecats!" he barked. "I'm goin' t' start things poppin' with that bunch, an' wipe 'em out!"

He drew on his slick leather chaps and buckled his holster belt about his hips.

"Whut yuh goin' t' do?" Bill Bradshaw worried.

"I'm headin' fer Red Dot an' I'm goin' straight tuh Jasper Lawton!"

"I'd sorta rest a spell an' figger on 't," Bill counseled. "They'll pick yuh off, shore, Gard. An' that sorta leaves the rest of us up a stump, what with us all sorta dependin' on yuh t' lead us."

"Wait!" Gard suddenly exclaimed. "I got a better plan workin' in my head."

CHAPTER V

Night Riders

AMONG the wives of the ranch Gard found one who owned a bright red print dress.

He commandeered this, and had a red hood and cowl sewed out of it that would fit over his head and shoulders. Then, in spite of the protests of the other men, all of whom wanted to go with him, Gard selected a sorrel horse that would not be distinguishable from the general run of horses, as was the black and white mottled Rags, and rode out of the caverns.

The red hood which had been made for him, he concealed in his clothing. It was late afternoon when he got outside, and stifling hot up there in the badlands. Several of the men had accompanied him to the outside, but there he ordered them to stay back and let him go on his own way.

Exactly what his plan was, he refused to divulge. But he did ask that the first report of Red Hoods be made back to the caverns where he would himself report in case he failed to locate any of the night riders. Then he started along Vanishing River, riding leisurely, his sharp grey eyes darting everywhere, so that no living thing moved within his range of vision without his observing it.

HE came first to his own spread. Sight of the havoc which had been wrought, wiping out the last possession which he could claim, made him draw his thin lips down tightly across his white teeth. He rode on. He passed the Circle Dot. The same thing had happened there. And still further on at the Bridle Bit, and still beyond that at the Lazy YY. All in desolate, blackened ruins.

Mile after mile he rode, searching for some evidence of the presence of Red Hoods in the Vanishing River region. Night came on and the moon slid up over the rugged horizon. Still he moved on. Everywhere was proof that the Red Hoods had been there and passed by, but there was no sign of the Red Hoods themselves. Having succeeded in driving all of the ranchers out of the country, as they supposed, they evidently were content to await developments before actually laying claim to Vanishing River.

By riding all night, Gard came in the early dawn to the end of the route, which was the furthermost reach of Vanishing River. Here Lars Orr, the Swede, had once had his LO ranch. The buildings had all been wiped out, and the hay. Discouraged, facing a long ride back to the caverns, Gard drew into a sheltered dale where he planned to

rest for a few hours before facing the blistering heat of the return journey.

Without warning he came upon a large cavvy of saddle horses tied to a picket line. And guarding them was a single sentry, a waddie who had been asleep, but who came to his feet, startled, his gun in his hand, at the sudden appearance of Gard Runyan.

The guard was a stranger to Runyan, but a gunman by his looks. He made a swift appraisal of Gard, and, evidently recognizing him, started upward with his gun. He shot. But he was too late. The bullet went whining into the humid air, as he threw wide his arms with a piercing scream and fell dead on his face, a bullet between the eyes.

Making that lightning smooth draw which had saved his life before this, Gard had shot from the hip as he sat in his saddle. Then, without waiting to see what the effect of those two shots would be, he wheeled the sorrel from the dale and crowded into a gully. He rode along it at a furious pace until he reached a shelf of rock that overlooked not only the dale but a narrow meadow basin adjacent to the Vanishing River valley, where in ancient times there had been a back wash from the river, but which of late had been one of Lare Orr's hay meadows, well screened from sight. Gard himself was hidden from view behind a stubborn growth of chaparrel sprouting from the soil-filled cracks of the rocks.

FROM this point of vantage he looked into the hidden valley and saw a dozen or fifteen men running up through the rocks toward the cavvy, hurrying evidently, to investigate the meaning of those shots. They were playing cautious, keeping themselves sheltered as they surrounded the place.

This, however, was not of greatest interest to Gard in that moment. In the center of the meadow, these men had been at work digging a series of deep, wide-mouthed holes like well-shafts.

"Huntin' for water!" Gard exclaimed aloud, involuntarily. "Now who'd ever o' thought of an idea like that?"

AND all at once a great light broke upon him. Here was possibly the answer as to why the Red Hoods wanted possession of Vanishing River. Knowing that beneath the whole valley there was a lost river of life-living water, they were going down after it, to bring it up and turn it onto the parched acres of the valley, making of it a rich paradise of hay land for stock.

And Gard knew definitely that the water was under there, because he had found it, flowing in heavy volume through the secret caverns at the lower end of the dry river.

He had little time for conjecture, however, as the men who were surrounding the dale had now located his trail. Slowly they were working toward him, grimly determined to run him down.

Slipping away from his screened position, he climbed higher into the rough country. From time to time he saw his pursuers. They had taken to their saddles and were closing in on him.

Retreating steadily before their advance, Gard kept well ahead of them, following the general course of Vanishing River. Then, in a sloping walled canyon that was strewn with large boulders, he faced about, drew rein and waited for the man-hunters, calmly smoking one cigarette after another until he heard the clatter of many horses' hoofs converging upon his retreat.

When the vanguard of the pursuers came into sight around a sharp

bend in the canyon, Gard was perhaps more surprised than they. To his surprise he saw that the group was led by Sheriff Slow Polk and Squinty Shadrow. It was not the Red Hoods, then, as he had believed, but the posse organized to run him to earth, and to bring him in dead or alive.

He was not prepared for this, but not by the flicker of an eyelash did he reveal his concern. When the riders came into view and saw him he was lolling in his saddle, looking steadily into their faces, a mirthless grin woven into the sun-wrinkles of his face.

"Howd'y, Slow! An' Squinty!" he drawled. "Lookin' for someone, was yuh?"

Guns flashed out of holsters. A dozen of them covered him in an instant, but Gard did not alter his position.

"We got yuh!" Sheriff Slow Polk barked. "Make a move an' we'll fill yuh so full o' lead a hoss couldn't tote yuh!"

"This yere's a mighty powerful-built horse for his size," Gard opined insolently, crushing the fire from his cigarette butt between his fingers.

"Save yore jokes t' crack when yuh got a rope 'round yore neck," Squinty Shadrow snarled. "Go on, Sheriff! Git him! The dirty Red Hood!"

GARD kept the humorless grin plastered on his face, but his eyes were cold as death.

"This is one time I got yuh topped!" he said evenly. "What d'y think I led yuh clear down yere for, if it wasn't t' bring yuh into my trap? An' yuh led like a bunch o' lambs."

Squinty Shadrow looked quickly about him, and Sheriff Polk stirred uneasily. There was that assurance in Gard's tone which made them hesitate to call his bluff, even if they did think that it was a bluff. Then Gard spoke again, a soft purr in his voice.

"Us folks was out lookin' for yuh," he said. "We got an ambushed rifleman behind all o' them boulders up there on the slope, an' every man in yore outfit's covered. If I was smart like you fellers, I'd put my gun back in the leather an' ride outta here whilst I could!"

SHADROW swore and rode his horse forward a dozen paces, so that he had a closer look at Gard.

"That's a lie!" he yelled. "Yuh ain't got me bluffed none at all, Runyan."

"Raise yore hand then, an' yuh'll drop dead in yore tracks! An' likewise every man in the outfit."

Squinty's bad eye was twitching, the sign that death was about to burst from his gun. Gard's eyes were peeping from between narrow slits.

"Wantta call?" he asked between close-clenched teeth.

Slowly Squinty Shadrow dropped his gun back into its holster. And the possemen behind him did the same.

"On yore way out," said Gard, "I wouldn't even look back."

"You ain't through with me," Shadrow promised.

"I shore hope I ain't," Gard retorted. "In the end, the two of us is gonna draw, when I settle fer that business in Deadman's Canyon, an' fer what yuh done to my Sleepy UJ. Only it wouldn't be safe for yore outfit right now."

Stubbornly, sullenly, the riders turned and left the canyon. When they had gone, Gard rode away in the opposite direction. But he did not return to the caverns. Instead, he deliberately retraced his course up Vanishing River, to the little valley where he had found these men,

supposedly a posse, digging wells in the ground.

In the valley he examined their work. They were going down to bedrock, a distance of ten feet or more. But they were not finding water. Every hole was dry, and they had tried in a dozen places.

More mystified than ever at such hopeless persistence, Gard left the place and started the return journey to the caverns.

He rested himself and horse through the heat of midday, and late in the afternoon he took up the march again. He had made some interesting discoveries that day, but he had not gained much definite information concerning the mystery about Vanishing River. Unless the reason why the Red Hoods wanted to exterminate the ranchers, was to find the water and put it on the land, as their attempts at well-digging would indicate.

Lost in deep speculation, and grown a little careless in his vigilance with the weariness which was upon him, he was not prepared for the ambush which opened up on him as he was climbing up through a jumbled section of the badlands.

The crack of a rifle from behind a cluster of monoliths of lava sent a bullet whining close to Gard's ear. He dropped over onto the side of his horse, lying along the neck, while he brought his six-gun into action. But there was no sign of the ambusher anywhere.

PUTTING spurs to the sorrel, he sped through the tangled sagebrush, mesquite and boulders, searching the country about him.

Then another bullet, coming from closer range, clipped the pommel of the saddle. The pony squealed in fright and plunged madly along the trail. More lead was poured after the fleeing pair. The bullets were whining about Gard like bees, and still he had not located the sniper.

Coming to a large boulder, he dropped from the saddle of the careening pony and lit lightly on his toes and hands in a clump of sagebrush. At the same time he sent the pony rocketing forward with flapping stirrups.

He crouched behind the boulder and swiftly reloaded his gun, which he had emptied in fruitless search for the hidden foe. Then he waited. The firing had ceased when he had vanished from sight. He lay perfectly still, his burning eyes carefully searching every inch of the broad, rough slope along which he had been riding.

MINUTES passed. Thirty yards above him, and slightly ahead of his position, was a dense cluster of mesquite which held his attention. He watched it and presently he saw what he took to be the movement of an upper stem of a bush. He could not be certain, so he held his fire.

More minutes slid by. And then he was certain that the waiting killer lay in this clump. Distinctly Gard saw the brush moving. The man was getting ready to leave his ambush. Swiftly, silently, Gard raised his gun, leveled it at the spot, and waited. The brush moved more violently.

Gard's fingers closed over the trigger, ready to press it.

Then, out of the brush, there waddled into view a little striped animal with a big bushy tail.

Gard swore softly and dropped his gun hand. But instantly it went up again. A few feet to one side of the skunk, the brush moved violently and a man stood to his full height, backing away from the advancing animal. Over his head he wore a scarlet hood.

"Stick 'em up!" Gard commanded, leaping to his feet.

The man took one look, threw up his rifle and fired.

Once more Gard's own gun barked. There was a flash of red powder fire and a bullet went whining up the slope. The Red Hood fell and lay silent, while the curious skunk sniffed at his still smoking rifle, then waddled away.

CHAPTER VI

Reward

EMERGING from the badlands on the crest of the midday heat, Gard Runyan, mounted on Rags, swung into the wide thoroughfare which divided the twin rows of low frame buildings in Red Dot. The limp form of a dead man was draped across the saddle-bow of a trailing pony.

Looking straight ahead out of eyes that were like glittering diamonds, Gard moved down the center of the street. His bridle reins were looped loosely through the fingers of his left hand, while his right lay close to the butt of his six-gun.

Though he sat his horse with the careless indifference of one born to the leather, he was acutely aware that men leaning against hitching-rails and lounging in doorways straightened up with sudden alacrity at sight of him. In dumbfounded amazement they stared at the red-hooded corpse he unconcernedly escorted.

No one had a greeting for him, however, as he passed. Instead, there fell upon the place a sinister hush that was redolent of sudden death.

The lone rider with his dead cargo sensed the hostility in the quick glances that passed between men as they dropped their hands to their guns. Though his inscrutable face with its firm jaw was thrust grimly forward, his hard eyes were alive in their deep sockets, missing no movement among those who contemplated their chances of making a successful draw against him.

Out of the north and toward the south he rode, facing into the full blast of the sun without squinting, his lithe body swaying to the slow rhythm of his pony. He came at last to the courthouse and jail building, which blocked the street as though it were a barrier against further encroachment of the vast open rangeland behind it.

Here Rags stopped at a pressure from his rider's knees, and Gard Runyan swung to the ground, tossing the reins of the two horses over the hitching-rail.

His slim, square-shouldered back to the town, he walked up the three steps to the wide entrance. He paused before a bulletin board upon which was tacked a single, bold-lettered notice. This he carefully and slowly read aloud:

DEAD OR ALIVE!

A reward of $5000 will be paid for the person of Gard Runyan, leader of the Red Hoods. Also there will be paid $1000 reward, dead or alive, for each member of this desperate gang of outlaws who are wanted for murder, cattle stealing and many other crimes.

Notify Sheriff Slow Polk or Jasper Lawton, President of the Inchelium Stockgrowers' Association at Red Dot, Montana.

His thin lips curling back from his even, white teeth, Gard reached up with his left hand and tore the notice from the board, carrying it with him into the building.

BEFORE the open doorway of the first stuffy office he stopped. Inside, behind a make-shift desk, sat Sheriff Slow Polk. He had a gun in his hand, and the muzzle was leveled steadily at Gard Runyan's heart.

"I got yuh!" the officer triumphantly greeted him, his washed-out

blue eyes masking the emotions behind them. "Seen yuh comin' an' reckoned t' give yuh a right hearty welcome."

"I wouldn't," Gard suggested, "do anything in a hurry I might feel sorry for later.

"I got a nervous trigger finger. Spit out what yuh want."

The lines of Gard Runyan's face deepened into the semblance of a hard grin.

"Brung in this yere reward notice, Sheriff," he answered smoothly, proffering the printed sheet across the desk.

Slow Polk's expression did not alter.

"Givin' yoreself up fer a fair trial?" he queried suspiciously. "Playin' smart, when yuh knowed we was bound t' git yuh sooner er later? Lay that shootin' rod on the desk, butt first, an' lift up yore dukes."

Gard still had the trace of a cynical grin lurking in the network of fine lines around his deep eyes.

"Shore," he readily agreed, drawing the gun from its holster while Sheriff Polk watched the move with tense, strained muscles. "Seein' as how yuh're supposed to be the law in these parts, I'd reckoned we could talk this over without gun play. But if we can't, why, here yuh are."

WITH a twitch of the wrist that seemed so slight it was almost negligible, yet so swift that the eye could not follow, Runyan spun the heavy gun in his fingers, neatly knocking Sheriff Polk's weapon from his hand into the air, where he caught it by the butt as it descended. At the same time the muzzle of his own gun went forward against the officer's chest.

"It's a matter of mathe—matics, Slow," Gard cheerfully said. "One from one is bound tuh leave nothin'. That's yuh at the present moment. An' now, if yuh'll give me yore undivided attention, I'll explain myself."

"Go tuh blazes!" Sheriff Polk savagely growled. "With five thousand dollars on yore head, yuh couldn't git outta town alive."

"That's still a matter of 'rithmetic!"

"I'm listenin'!" The officer glared his defiance, though there was now the fear of sudden and violent death registered in his voice.

"I come in t' collect the reward which it is stated yere will be paid for a Red Hood, dead or alive."

SHERIFF POLK'S hands, where they were laid out across the desk in front of him, began to tremble. Then he took a deep breath and looked furtively toward an open window ten feet away.

Gard interpreted the glance.

"I kin clip the head from a sand swallow in full flight," he warned. "Yuh'd make a simple target, goin' through there. Now, as I was sayin', 'bout this yere reward notice—"

"I didn't have nothin' t' do with gittin' that out," Slow Polk somewhat desperately denied. "It was done by Jasper Lawton."

"I ain't 'sprised. But what I want to know is, have yuh got the money ready tuh pay?"

"Tuh blazes with yuh!"

"Hand over one thousand dollars if yuh know what's good for yuh, Slow. I've got a Red Hood out yonder, an' I aim t' collect on him."

Sheriff Polk gulped and swallowed hard.

"Don't be scared," Gard jeered. "I shot him first. He's dead."

"Wh-who yuh got?"

"A bad *hombre* by the name o' Curly Gus."

"He's a deputy fer the association. That's another murder agin yuh!"

"He was wearin' a red hood when

I drilled him. He's still got it on, as yuh'll see when yuh take a look out front. An' now I want my reward."

"The money's over t' Jasper Lawton's bank," the officer craftily stalled, playing for time. "We got t' go over there after it."

Watching Sheriff Polk's face, Gard Runyan saw a change flash over it and wheeled. Too late!

"Yeah! Let's go an' git it!" Squinty Shadrow gloated, a dangerous threat in his voice, death written on his sneering, wolfish countenance.

Gard let the two guns slide from his fingers to the floor.

"Yore ante, Squinty," he shrugged.

"Git movin', Slow," Squinty snarled. "Lock some steel ont' this yere *hombre*, then tell Lawton, an' have him round up some o' the boys fer a jury. The boss'll wantta make a good hangin' example outta a open an' shut case like this. That's the only reason I ain't pulled the trigger."

Sheriff Polk, stirred to action, moved around in front of the captive. In a flash Runyan's booted right foot shot out and caught the officer on the shin. With a howl of pain he doubled up, grabbing his leg with both hands. Another stunning kick sent him crashing backward against Squinty Shadrow, knocking the gunman off balance in the unexpected mêlée so that he toppled against the wall, cursing loudly and struggling desperately to get his gun into action.

WHEELING, Gard recovered his own gun from the floor. He started to cover Shadrow and the still struggling sheriff, when he heard footsteps in the hall outside. Turning, he sprang across the room to the open window, which gave him a sweeping view of the street.

Below him, a dozen yards away, Rags stood at the rail with the horse bearing the dead Red Hood Gard had brought in. Three riders had dared to come up and were examining the body. Startled at the sounds of commotion from the sheriff's office, they looked in time to see Gard poised on the window sill, and they began to reach for their guns.

The first one to draw died before he got his gun up. Gard shot him through the heart.

DOWN the street a block away, half a dozen more riders were coming. At sight of Runyan they set spurs to their horses, prodding them into a dead run, at the same time opening up with a bombardment of long-range shooting that sent lead spattering harmlessly against the wooden walls of the office.

"Kill 'im! It's Gard Runyan gittin' away!" a voice bellowed above the pandemonium which had broken loose in the quiet little town. Others took up the cry immediately, adding to the confusion.

Clusters of men along the sidewalks, all Lawton's men, who had been organizing to surround the courthouse building, sprinted to cover. In an instant after his spectacular appearance at the window, the street was deserted except for the two groups of men on horses.

Gard sized up the situation with photographic swiftness. One of the men at the rail he had killed, but the remaining two were finding their guns, ready to stop him. Behind him men with guns were running along the hallway, while in the room Squinty Shadrow and Sheriff Polk were untangling themselves, and would be pouring lead into his back.

To his left and over the heads of the horsemen at the rail, and almost on a level with his own eyes, were several rooms above Lawton's flat bank building.

A window shade in one of these

rooms moved slightly, revealing the shadowy form of a man behind it. And that man was holding a rifle in his hand. He had the muzzle thrust between the shade and the sash. Looking straight into the bore, Gard had the sensation that it was as big as a cannon.

Death was leering at him from every side. In that instant there seemed no possibility of escape. But he leaped wide of the window and landed on the ground a full ten feet away from the building. His legs sagged beneath his weight and he almost stumbled. A bullet fired from a six-gun at close range whined past his ear. He recovered his balance and started running.

Another bullet tore a hole through his sombrero, nearly knocking it from his head. Then he reached the hitching-rail, laid a hand on it, and catapulted into the saddle.

BULLETS were whining like hornets all around him now. Several of them cut his clothing and seared his flesh. Once he had the sickening sensation that the end had come, when he felt the hot lash of lead laid across his shoulder close to the bad wound which he had gotten in his earlier encounter with the Red Hoods. Blood spurted from a scalp wound and ran in a zigzag stream down across his forehead and into his eyes. With the back of a hand he dashed it away, clearing his vision.

One of the two men at the rail had his gun on him, his finger pressing the trigger. Whipping his own gun into this fellow's face, Gard fired. The killer slumped, half his face blown away. Gard was getting dizzy now. The bombardment deafened him to the shouts of those closing in for the kill.

But he was on Rags. His toes were in the stirrups. The steel-muscled pinto was snorting to go.

Stretching flat along the pony's side to shield his body, he turned Rags toward the rear of the county building.

"Get goin', baby," he begged.

Beyond the building, the wide open range spread out to the horizon and further. There he would have an even break in a straight-away race.

As he wheeled, a gun was thrust into his face over Rags' neck. It was the third bloodthirsty demon who had been at the hitching-rail. Death was laughing at Gard now.

He pulled the trigger of his own gun, but the pin snapped on an empty shell. Death shouted like a maniac.

Then, in that instant, Gard got a distorted impression of a shadowy form behind the window shade in the room above Lawton's bank. A streak of flame spat out of the rifle muzzle, and the man menacing Gard with the six-gun fell dead, a look of surprised horror on his face.

Rags turned the corner and the storm of lead ceased. But a single thought kept stabbing at Gard's dulled brain.

Up there in that window, an unknown had shot down one of Gard's enemies, to save Gard's life.

CHAPTER VII

Spy Work

SPEEDING swiftly away across the open range, Gard heard the hue and cry of the chase forming behind him. But he did not turn to look.

Before the blurred vision of his bloodshot eyes he still was seeing that figure with the rifle; seeing the yellow flash of flame from the muzzle of that gun; seeing the look of surprise on the face of the killer who was drawing his finger against the trig-

ger of a gun held at Gard's head.

In all of Red Dot, Gard would have sworn that there was not a single person who would have befriended him. A man with a five thousand dollar reward on his head, a man who dared to defy the powerful Jasper Lawton, could not hope for friends in Red Dot.

Yet one unknown person in the town that was owned by Jasper Lawton had saved his life!

It was easy for him to shake off the pursuit. He knew every twisting trail in that country. He dodged into a coulee and rode through a gap into a sea of tall sage and mesquite, where a hundred riders could not have found him. There he waited until the possemen under Squinty Shadrow and the sheriff had gone their way.

Then he turned Rags nonchalantly toward the badlands and Vanishing River, and rode at a leisurely pace until he had come to his own range.

From a point of vantage he carefully studied the landscape until he was certain there were no spies about to watch his movements. Then he dipped swiftly down into a dry arroyo which he followed until he came to a narrow ravine. Along the ravine he moved until at last he reached the mouth of a small cave beneath the cliff, into which he rode.

THE cave was barren and entirely visible, but once inside Gard stood on tiptoe in the stirrups, reaching above his head to the ceiling, where behind a ledge he seized a section of steel cable on which he tugged.

Instantly at the back of the cave a huge boulder began to rise upward toward the ceiling, while behind him, in the entrance through which he had just come, an equally large boulder slid down from the ceiling. It fit into the place, blocking the cave mouth so that it would not be visible from the ravine.

The two boulders were counterweights to each other, so perfectly balanced on pullies that by pulling on the steel cord they could be raised or lowered at will.

This was one of the secret emergency entrances to the underground caverns where the ranchers of Vanishing River were camped beside the black waters of the stream. Passing along the channel, Gard presently came to the main subterranean chambers where he gave the nighthawk call to inform those inside that he was approaching.

ALL were eager to learn from him what he had discovered in Red Dot, as his dangerous foray there with the dead Red Hood had been only a pretext to learn, if he could, something of the situation. All of the ranchers had been out of touch with the opposition for some time now.

Gard's report of the well-digging at the upper end of Vanishing River aroused keen interest, as this seemed to be the first step on the part of the enemy actually to seize their lands. Immediately it was decided that a dozen or more of the men should ride up there that very night to make a further inspection of this work.

Gard, however, did not accompany them. After a meal prepared by the women of the camp, he selected a black horse, leaving Rags underground, and left the caverns by the main entrance.

Beneath the starlit sky again, he lost his hurry. He moved silently as a ghost over into the Vanishing River valley, where he clung to the deep shadows, keeping himself and his horse screened from view. He kept watching in all directions as he moved steadily along the old river course.

He had gone for perhaps five miles, and the moon had come up, casting an eerie sheen of silver over

the rough landscape, when he drew a quick rein and swung back into the shadows. Ahead of him, fifty yards, he had seen something move.

In the gloom it might have been a cow or a horse, or even a bear, but Gard waited, his hand on the butt of his gun.

Presently the object moved again, came out of a gulley. And, clearly silhouetted against the skyline for an instant, Gard saw a horse and rider. They moved only a short distance, then stopped in a cluster of shadows.

Gard sat in his saddle watching the shadows for some time. They remained motionless. Finally he whistled softly, a call which he had heard on several occasions when the Red Hoods had been invading Vanishing River, and which he had come to be certain was the identifying whistle of the night riders.

At first there was no answer from the lone watcher in the shadows. But when Gard had repeated the call again, he heard it from the lips of the night sentinel he had been watching.

Certain that this person was not alarmed or suspicious at his presence there, Gard moved forward a dozen yards. He kept in the deep shadows so that he would not be seen, but made no effort to cover the sound of his approach. Stopping once more, he repeated the signal whistle and got a quick answer.

THUS reassured, he moved forward still further. Then he saw the other rider come out into the open. The silvery beams of the moon showed him clearly, only a short distance away.

And over his head he wore a red hood.

From his clothing Gard quickly drew his own red hood. This he fitted over his head in exactly the manner of the Red Hoods he had encountered in the past. Then without further delay, with his right hand resting close to his gun holster, he, too, rode out into the open, to meet the Red Hood. They came together in the center of the cleared space where the moonlight set them both out clearly.

As they halted, only a few feet apart, each seemed to be waiting for the other to make a move. To Gard this silence was dangerous, but he dared not make a break. An instant later he thanked his lucky star that he had held his tongue. For the other rider, a big man it was easy to see, spoke.

"NUMBER SEVEN!" the big Red Hood said, a growl in his throat.

"Number Fifteen!" Gard answered promptly, taking his cue that this was the means of identification between the Red Hoods, and selecting a number at random.

"What yuh doin' yere?" Number Seven demanded suspiciously.

"Same thing's yuh," Gard retorted.

"Like blazes yuh are!"

Gard felt a prickly sensation race along his spine. There was a dangerous threat in the tone of this Red Hood. Stealthily Gard let his long fingers close about the wooden butt of his gun, and waited.

The other spoke up again.

"Where's Number One?" he asked.

Gard took his courage in his hand and plunged on.

"I just left some o' the boys back there a ways, on orders from Number One tuh round up the rest o' yuh that's up this way an' head back. They've found Gard Runyan's trail, an' follered it t' the secret hide-out where them Vanishin' River folks is holed up. Come on!"

Number Seven accepted this eagerly. He turned in beside Gard, whose pulse now was racing.

His scheme had worked perfectly,

without arousing a suspicion. He had his Red Hood, following him like a lamb, straight into the mouth of the trap which he had set to catch one of them, and to force from him the secrets of the bloody order.

Eager to get out of the open and back into the caverns, Gard pushed his pony at a stiff pace, the other keeping at his side. Neither of them had anything further to say.

Coming down along a crooked coulee half an hour later, they heard ahead of them the pounding of horses' hoofs.

"Yere they come now," said Number Seven.

"Wait!" Gard whispered, laying a hand on the arm of the other. "Git back outta sight yere an' stay still. It might be Gard Runyan an' them Vanishin' River ranchers."

Screened among a clump of chaparrel in the black shadows, the two held themselves tense as a score or more riders swung around a bend and came forward at a steady lope, heading along the coulee toward the upper end of Vanishing River.

As the mass of night riders swung by them, so close that they could see that each of them wore a red hood, Gard's heart began to pound wildly. But he took a chance.

"Come on!" he hoarsely whispered to his hooded companion. "It's the boys! An' they're headin' fer some place in a hurry."

AS the tail end of the hooded procession passed, the two of them swung in behind without being detected, and mingled with the other riders.

No suspicion was aroused by them as there were so many in the group that it would have been hard to keep track of all.

On and on they rode until they had covered several miles. Then, in a sheltered basin, a halt was called. One of the hooded riders spurred his horse out in front and faced the others.

"We got 'em this time!" this man said. Gard, still keeping beside the first man he had encountered, caught his breath sharply. There was no mistaking that voice now. Squinty Shadrow was the leader of the Red Hoods. Gard heard the man beside him give a low grunt.

"Piggy Evans saw the whole bunch of 'em ride like hell towards the workin's up above," the leader went on. "They're gittin' wise. What we gotta do is git up there an' surround 'em. Then, when I shoot, that's the signal t' rush in an' wipe 'em out. Shoot t' kill! Don't leave a one alive. That's the answer we got fer 'em!"

GARD shut his thin-lipped mouth tightly. The story needed no explaining. Spies of the Red Hoods had seen the ranchers move away from the rendezvous and hurry toward the upper end of Vanishing River, and they were going to close in on them, wipe them out without a chance to fight back.

Alone and single-handed, a spy among this group, Gard Runyan had to stop them, turn them from this purpose. Or else get a warning to his friends, prepare them for the showdown which was coming.

He knew now the identity of the leader, though he had really had no doubts from the start. Squinty Shadrow was the leader of the Red Hoods, working under instructions from Jasper Lawton. But this made the whole situation all the more dangerous, for Shadrow was a killer who would stop at nothing.

When the march was resumed, Gard let his pony lag. Half a mile ahead of them was a deep, dark ravine cutting off sharply from the river valley. If he could edge into this he could cut overland and beat the Red Hoods to the head of the

river. The ranchers, warned, could prepare to meet the attack.

A foot at a time, Gard let his horse drag back until he was bringing up the rear. The ravine was only a few hundred yards ahead now. Beads of perspiration standing out on his forehead under the tight fitting red hood, he dropped back a little further.

He was almost ready to make the break, to slip quietly into the shadows and drift into the ravine.

Suddenly two men with hoods wheeled and dropped in on either side of him.

"What yuh doin' back yere?" one of them snarled. "Gittin' cold feet? Knowed we shouldn't a brung a sniveler like yuh along, an' told Shadrow as much. Yuh may be sheriff, but yuh ain't foolin' me, Slow Polk."

"Yuh're makin' a mistake," Gard answered coldly, holding his nerve. "I—I'm Number Fifteen."

The second man swore.

"Like the devil yuh are! I'm Fifteen!" he snarled into the silence, like the booming voice of death.

CHAPTER VIII

Flaming Lead

BEING in a desperate corner had caused Gard to make that bold play. But he had given the wrong answer.

"Spy!" the man who had stopped him shouted.

Before Gard could make a move, a gun muzzle was jabbed into his side and a hand reached up to tear his mask from his head. Twisting his body sidewise so that the bullet missed by fractions, he struck down the hand that was grasping his hood and brought his own gun up with a speed that was almost inconceivable.

He covered the other man, but he did not pull the trigger. A sixth sense that functioned without his will warned him that now and here was not the time nor the place for a showdown with the Red Hoods. So he menaced them with his gun while he backed his horse slowly toward the black mouth of the ravine.

Over on one side, but clearly within range of his vision, Gard saw the big man whom he had first accosted and who had identified himself as Number Seven. The man had his gun in his hand but he was not threatening with it. It was more as though he were waiting for someone really to start trouble.

WITH a last defiant order for every one of them to stand back, Gard plunged his midnight black into the ravine and vanished from sight. But no more time had elapsed than was sufficient for him to turn when the guns began to blaze. A veritable hail of lead came whining along the ravine, cutting through the dark as yellowish-red streaks of flame burst from smoking guns in the hands of the Red Hoods.

Gard bent low in the saddle and gave the black the reins. This horse was not like his own mottled pinto, Rags, and he was not certain what it would do under a barrage of bullets. But now it heeded his bidding, and seemed to fly.

Behind him the Red Hoods were following, but they were shooting without a visible target. Also, being unaware that the floor of the ravine slanted downward a short distance in, their lead was all going high so that Gard was in no great danger from them.

Coming to a bend, he was entirely in the clear, and he pushed on sitting erect in the saddle.

He was thinking all the time about that big man who called himself

Number Seven. There was something about him that was mighty familiar and something about his actions which aroused a deep curiosity in Gard.

"I'm aimin' to find out more 'bout him when we have the showdown," he muttered to himself. Giving the black more rein, he urged it to even greater speed. He had a hard climb ahead of him, over the short cut to the head of Vanishing River, if he would be in time to warn and organize the ranchers against the oncoming Red Hoods. The marauders would have easy traveling up the floor of the old river valley.

It was a long ride to make without a stop, but the black proved equal to the test. Near the break of dawn Gard came again to the country where he had surprised the group of Lawton's men digging their holes, and where he had been forced to shoot down the cavvy guard.

HE circled the place and saw below him, from a low plateau, the dark forms of the ranchers. They had been riding easily, and were just entering the little sheltered meadow valley to make an inspection of the mysterious wells.

Giving the nighthawk call to identify himself, Gard swooped down a long slope into the valley and raced toward them.

"Red Hoods!" he shouted when he was within calling range. "They're comin' like hell! Git under cover an' be ready for 'em!"

Bill Bradshaw and Jim Piper rode over to meet him.

"How yuh know?" Bill queried. "We been ridin' the high trail an' we ain't seen a sign. Likewise, we left Artie Potts back on top o' Gray Butte t' give us a fire signal warnin' in case they come through."

"Don't stop t' ask questions," Gard blazed at them. "They're a-comin' hell-bent-fer-'lection."

Even the little time they had lost in this exchange of words was too much. Up the valley came the Red Hoods on a dead run, sweeping in on them with whoops and with rifle fire, from a distance that could not be answered by the six-gun fire of the ranchers.

There was no further time for organization of their forces nor for concerted action.

"Hi—tail fer cover!" Gard shouted. "Git behind somethin' an' every man fer himself!"

They scattered like a convention of jackrabbits at the approach of wolves, every rancher quitting his horse to let it run wild while he dived for the black shadows which were still thick just before the break of day.

Bullets from the rifle fire were now whining over their heads, singing a song of death. But darkness and the speed of their approach spoiled the aim of the Red Hoods, and they were further confused by the fact that the ranchers had dismounted and were scattering. In that first encounter no one was wounded.

By the time the Red Hoods were at the point where the ranchers had first been, Gard's forces were all hidden. At the signal which Gard sounded, they opened a withering cross fire that came from three sides, pouring in on the Red Hoods.

Curses and groans answered this charge. Hits were being scored. A horse screamed and went plunging to the ground. Another reared up on its hind legs and fell back dead. Two more horses went racing away across the valley with empty stirrups flapping, their riders dead in the meadow grass.

ADOPTING the methods of the ranchers, the remainder of the Red Hoods abandoned their horses and sent them back out of range with a guard. The main fighting force came

grimly on, moving toward the point of concentration where most of the ranchers had gathered behind a mass of huge boulders.

It was a good shield, and the Red Hoods, creeping across a wide open space to attack, were open to a scathing fire. But once the charge had been made and the enemy reached the boulders, the result would be little less than extermination of both sides.

Gard saw the danger of letting the Red Hoods reach the rocks. He shouted to the others.

"Come on! We gotta bust outta here an' drive 'em back!"

TEN men answered his call, meaning that three of the ranchers were already finished. They came out from behind the rocks with their guns spitting flame, and they charged directly into the approaching enemy. The Red Hoods, taken by surprise in this counter attack, involuntarily fell back, though they fought bitterly every foot of the distance, disputing the way with red blood.

At his side Gard heard Joe Jenkins of the Lazy Y Y grunt, and saw him fall forward on his face. But he had no time to stop. A sizzling sheet of lead was swiping the slope. Twice within half a minute Gard felt the bite of bullets in his flesh but he did not hesitate.

Ahead of them, in the meadow, the Red Hoods were suffering heavy losses. There had been twenty or more of them at the start, in that first charge. That number had now been cut down by a third, at least.

But once more the tables were slowly turning on the ranchers. For the Red Hoods had reached the shadows of a boulder-strewn slope behind them, with the Vanishing River ranchers once more out in the open meadow.

"Git down!" Gard shouted, trying to organize his forces. "Take it flat on yore bellies an' crawl through the grass. They can't see yuh in the shadows next t' the ground."

The ranchers obeyed. And suddenly the firing from the slope beyond the meadow ceased, leaving a deathly, haunting silence over the place, like the intense quiet that comes after an electric storm.

But death was still lurking there, ready, to spit out at anything which moved. Gard advanced like a snake, wriggling his body through the grass, and on both sides of him others were following his example.

Ahead of him someone moved behind a clump of mesquite, that was now clearly visible in the strengthening light of the new day. Lying flat, with the muzzle of his gun resting over his left forearm, Gard fired at the movement. A man leaped up into the air and as though crazed by the shot, came wobbling dizzily into the open and straight toward the line of the ranchers.

No one fired at him, and when he was almost upon Gard, he dropped stone dead, without a sound.

The light was now strong enough to see at close range. Gard reached out and tore the red hood from the dead man's head.

The face he looked into was that of Sheriff Slow Polk!

THERE was increased danger in the strengthening light, for the short grass would not conceal the ranchers from view of the Red Hoods, who were now safely planted behind boulders on the slope.

"We got to storm 'em!" Gard shouted. "Stay low, but push ahead!"

The ranchers now had lost three more of their number. They came up to the piles of gravel dumped from the wells which Lawton's men had dug in the meadow. Here was slight protection, but not enough to warrant making a stand of it.

"Can't stop here!" Gard said, and

the grim line of ranchers moved on, past the wells.

But something happened here. Going up over a pile of gravel, one of the ranchers slipped and before he could catch himself, plunged into a well.

Gard heard the commotion and called out to know what was the matter.

"Bill Bradshaw's gone intuh a well!" came the answer.

There was no sound from the bottom of the pit, and no time to make closer investigation. In another minute or so the sun would come up over the crest of the horizon, like an exploding bomb, and everyone of them caught out there in the open meadow would be wiped out by those on the opposite slope.

THEN things started popping again. Without warning, a barrage of lead was poured about them by the waiting Red Hoods, who had at last located their position. None of the shots was effective, but it was proof of what would happen in a minute or so when the light was a little stronger.

Gard leaped to his feet, and began to run in a zigzag course toward the slope, and the protection of the same boulders which were shielding the enemy.

"They've cavvied their horses back yonder 'round the bend somewheres," he was thinking. "What I got to do is get there an' stir 'em up so's this outfit'll have to stay on foot."

Lead whined in his ears, but he ran on, and reached the protection of a large boulder a short distance up the slope. The remainder of his forces followed closely, diving for other boulders.

The light suddenly changed from grey to full day. Crouched behind another boulder so close to Gard that he could have reached out and touched him, was a Red Hood!

He was a big man, and instantly Gard recognized him. He was Number Seven of the night's encounter. But in the full light there was an even stronger familiarity about him.

"Jasper Lawton!" Gard gasped, covering him with his gun.

The ruler of the Inchelium was empty-handed. He reached up and pulled off his hood, revealing his wide, expressionless face.

"How're yuh, Number Fifteen?" he rumbled heavily.

"It looks," said Gard slowly, coldly, "like we'll settle everything at once, right here!"

His finger began to close in slowly on the hair trigger of his gun.

Jasper Lawton's expression did not change.

"Wait!" he bellowed. "I'll give yuh five thousand dollars if yuh'll catch Squinty Shadrow an' turn him over to me—for one minute. Then yuh kin do whatever yuh blame please with him!"

Gard masked his surprise behind stern features. A rancher crept up beside him.

"Here, Harlow!" Gard ordered. "Keep this yere bird covered. Don't let him make a move 'till I git back!"

CHAPTER IX

Showdown

CURIOUSLY the battle was still raging on the slope.

A fusillade of bullets spattered the rocks about the group. They flattened their faces in the ground. But when the fury of the bombardment had spent itself, Gard got to his hands and knees and crawled away.

From the shelter of another boulder five yards away he looked back. Harlow had a gun poked against Jasper Lawton's side.

The startling offer which the big

boss of the Inchelium had made to him left Gard dumbfounded.

"It's a dirty trick o' some kind he's tryin' tuh pull," he grimly decided. "If I'd a done right, I'd a blowed his brains out at the start."

Up above him he saw a movement beside a boulder and fired. The bullet splattered on the rock and a man leaped up and started running. Gard let out a shout and started after him.

And all at once, all of the Red Hoods were in full retreat as the Vanishing River ranchers began shouting and fell in beside Gard. The charge was swift and furious while it lasted, but inside a minute the slope was cleared of gunmen and the battle had swung around the point. The Red Hoods were sprinting for their horse cavvy!

Gard and his followers changed their course and cut up over a low ridge, to head them off. The two groups met almost upon the band of horses.

"Throw up yore arms, every danged one of yuh, or we're goin' to wipe yuh out!" Gard shouted in a lull which fell upon the scene.

Gard and his ranchers had the advantage of the boulders on the slope of the divide over which they had raced; the Red Hoods were in the open. Lead rained in between the Red Hoods and their horses. One man who tried to make it to a horse fell dead.

Sullenly, cornered, the others, at least a dozen of them, dropped their guns and raised their hands.

The showdown had come. The battle was over. The ranchers had won.

WITH guns bristling, the ranchers came out from cover and advanced upon their captives. They kept them surrounded, herded together, until Gard had decided just what should be done.

"I'll go git the Kingpin of the bunch—Jasper Lawton," the young leader said. "Harlow's holdin' him prisoner over the hill. The first one o' these birds that makes a move, drop him!"

Gard went slowly back to where Lawton was sitting on a boulder, his expressionless face a perfect blank as he stared off along Vanishing River. He turned cruel eyes toward Gard as the younger man came up and stood before him.

"We got Squinty Shadrow," Gard said. "Still want to sell him out?"

FOR the first time Gard saw an expression of passionate hate cross the big man's face.

"I'll kill 'im with my bare hands!" he burst out wildly. "I swear to Gawd I didn't know that yaller doublecrosser was headin' up these Red Hoods 'till I played in with 'em last night. He's a good gun-toter an' he knows cattle. He's been with me fer twenty years, an' I been loosin' stock all that time. He kept me full o' tales of what he was doin' to wipe out the rustlers, an' every onc't in a while he'd kill a man an' bring 'im in an' say he was a rustler.

"Then when the Red Hoods showed up, he made me believe they was the Vanishin' River ranchers, an' that you was leadin' 'em. But last night I found out different. I found out it was Squinty Shadrow an' the men I been payin' good wages to, that was wearin' the red hoods."

His eyelids narrowed, Gard tried to read the other's thoughts.

"What else did yuh find out?" he asked. "Why did Shadrow an' his men want Vanishin' River so bad?"

No one could have read Lawton's blank face.

"Jest tuh cover up what he was doin' agin me, I reckon."

"I don't believe that! An' next I suppose yuh'll say yuh didn't send Shadrow an' his killers out to Deadman's Canyon to waylay me, try tuh kill me an' rob em o' that hundred

thousand dollars which yuh paid tuh me!"

"What yuh kickin' 'bout? They didn't git it!" Jasper Lawton retorted.

"Didn't git it? Now I *know* yuh're playin' a game. They got it in a hurry, an' it ain't Shadrow's fault I ain't dead. That's a score he's goin' t' settle before him an' me's through."

Once more the big man's blank face registered emotion.

He reached out a hand and laid it on Gard's arm.

"Yuh say Shadrow got that money back from yuh?" he asked, ominously.

Gard nodded.

"Gimme a gun!" Lawton roared. "I lost mine in the first charge, but I gotta have one now. I gotta kill Shadrow. He told me he didn't git that money back."

"So that was yore game, then?" Gard cut in nastily. "Yuh tried tuh doublecross me, an' got doublecrossed yoreself. Well, it's goin' t' cost yuh double that much now."

"I'll pay it!" Jasper Lawton boomed. "What's more, I'll buy all o' Vanishin' River from yuh. I'll give yuh half a million dollars for it! I'll make it cash."

In the glow of the rising sun, Gard let his thin lips curl up from his teeth in a soundless snarl.

"What else did yuh find out last night?" he asked, softly. "A man like you ain't offerin' a half million dollars fer Vanishin' River outta charity."

"I'll make it a million!"

"NOW yuh are crazy. Yuh'd better spill it if yuh wantta save yore skin, Lawton."

The cattleman grew crafty.

"Is that any way tuh pay back what I done fer yuh?" he demanded.

"Yuh never done nothin' fer me but give me a pain!"

"I kep' yuh from gittin' a hole through yore head down at Red Dot t' other day."

Gard stared at him sharply.

"Saved me?" he exclaimed. "What yuh mean?"

"Shot from a window in my rooms above the bank, right when yuh was a gonner, Runyan. I guess yuh hadn't ought tuh fergit that!"

Into Gard's mind there flashed a remembrance of that rifle muzzle thrust between the blind and the sash. He wet his lips.

"What fer?" he asked, slowly.

"AIMED t' ask yuh 'bout that money which Shadrow said he didn't git back from yuh. Couldn't find out shore, if yuh was dead. I was already gittin' 'spicious of Shadrow."

"Fer a cheatin' lyin' crook, yuh got some things t' recommend yuh," Gard said, slowly. "Come on! Let's go have a talk with Shadrow."

They walked side by side, up over the rise, and down to where the prisoners were being herded. Gard spoke to one of the ranchers.

"How many'd we lose?"

The other shook his head. So Gard called the roll. Five of them failed to answer—a heavy price to pay for protection of their property against the Red Hood invaders. And among them were Gard's three best friends: Joe Jenkins, Jim Piper and Bill Bradshaw.

Gard hated to think of going back to the caverns and telling the wives of these men what had happened to them.

"There's Shadrow," he said to Jasper Lawton.

The two of them started toward the former Diamond Bar range superintendent.

Squinty had been watching them all the time, out of his evil eyes. When he saw them turn toward him, he reached out with a lightning movement and snatched a gun from a rancher's hand. Then, from the

ground, he leaped across the saddle of his own horse where it stood a few feet away.

Stretched along the horse's side to shield his body, he dug in his spurs. Before anyone realized the play he had made, he turned a bend and was out of sight!

Gard raised his gun and fired. The bullet went wild. Then he seized the reins of another horse and sprang into the saddle. Putting spurs to the animal, he plunged recklessly after Shadrow.

Fearlessly he drove into the ravine which had swallowed the outlaw, following the dust which the fleeing man was kicking up.

OUT of the ravine and up into the badlands the desperate death race went. The cold-blooded killer who had tried to destroy every living thing in the Vanishing River valley was escaping! But Gard Runyan kept doggedly on his trail. And finally they came to a deep canyon into which the rider ahead plunged.

His lean, bronzed face more grim than death itself, Gard raced on. In many ways, this canyon reminded him of the place in which Squinty Shadrow had lain in wait for him, and then had shot him down and stolen the ranchers' money. Gard thought, wildly enough, that it would be a good place to face Shadrow again, in the final act of this drama.

And as though that thought were a wish to be granted, Gard heard the rattle of stones ahead of him, and drew rein.

Slipping quietly from the saddle, he ground-reined the horse and moved forward on foot. He walked steadily, his head up, his chin thrust forward, the pupils of his eyes dilated to the fineness of pin-points.

Stepping around an angle of the canyon, he saw his man ahead of him. Squinty Shadrow's horse had sprained an ankle in a fall in the loose shale. Squinty had heard Gard coming and he was waiting for him.

Gard, his long arms dangling at his sides, came into full view. Twenty yards separated the men. They looked straight at each other.

"I don't shoot in the back!" Gard said, coldly.

Shadrow made a draw that was as swift as lightning. In the same breathless instant, Gard's right wrist twitched.

Two guns spoke, and only ears that were finely attuned could have distinguished that one report was ahead of the other.

Squinty Shadrow fell lifeless across his suffering horse, a bullet hole squarely through that evil, squinting eye that had given him his name. He died with his lips curled back in a snarl, exposing his yellow fangs, the way a wolf would die.

Gard walked up and shot the injured horse. Then he lifted the saddlebags and examined them. His money was there, what looked to be the whole hundred thousand dollars, which Squinty had been afraid to trust out of his possession.

Putting the bags across his own borrowed horse, Gard rode out of the badlands which, for all time, would hold the earthly remains of one tough *hombre* who would never steal or murder again.

JOINING the ranchers and the prisoners, he said to Jasper Lawton:

"I got my money back. Shadrow had it."

That was all the answer any of them needed as to the end of Squinty Shadrow.

"I might pay a little more for this land," Jasper Lawton began.

Faintly there came a call to their ears from the region of the wells which the Red Hoods had been digging in the meadow. Straining their ears, they heard it again. Lawton

wiped perspiration from his face.

"I'll make that three million, an' close the deal right now!"

Gard didn't hear him. He started running toward the open pits, just remembering something. When they were repulsing the Red Hoods, Bill Bradshaw had stumbled and rolled into one of those pits.

The first well he came to was empty, and the second one, too. But in the third one he found Bill. Bradshaw was standing in the bottom, looking up, and when he saw Gard he waved his hands wildly.

"Gold!" he yelled. "Nuggets like bird's eggs. Bedrock on this old Vanishin' River water course is plastered with gold. An' it's our'n!"

Gard dropped a rope to the man and hauled him to the surface. Both Bradshaw's hands, and his pockets, were full of gold nuggets.

Jasper Lawton came up, puffing.

"I'll give—"

"STILL a crook. Still a greedy robber!" Gard barked at him. "Now I get the drift. Lars Orr found this gold in Vanishin' River. Squinty Shadrow an' his gang got his secret an' murdered him. Then they tried to run all the rest of us out so's they'd have it themselves!"

"Yeah! The doublecrossin' thief didn't even let me in on it!" Jasper Lawton rumbled deep in his throat. "I didn't know a thing 'bout it 'til I got in with 'em last night an' overheard."

"That," finished Gard Runyan, "shore was jest too bad!"

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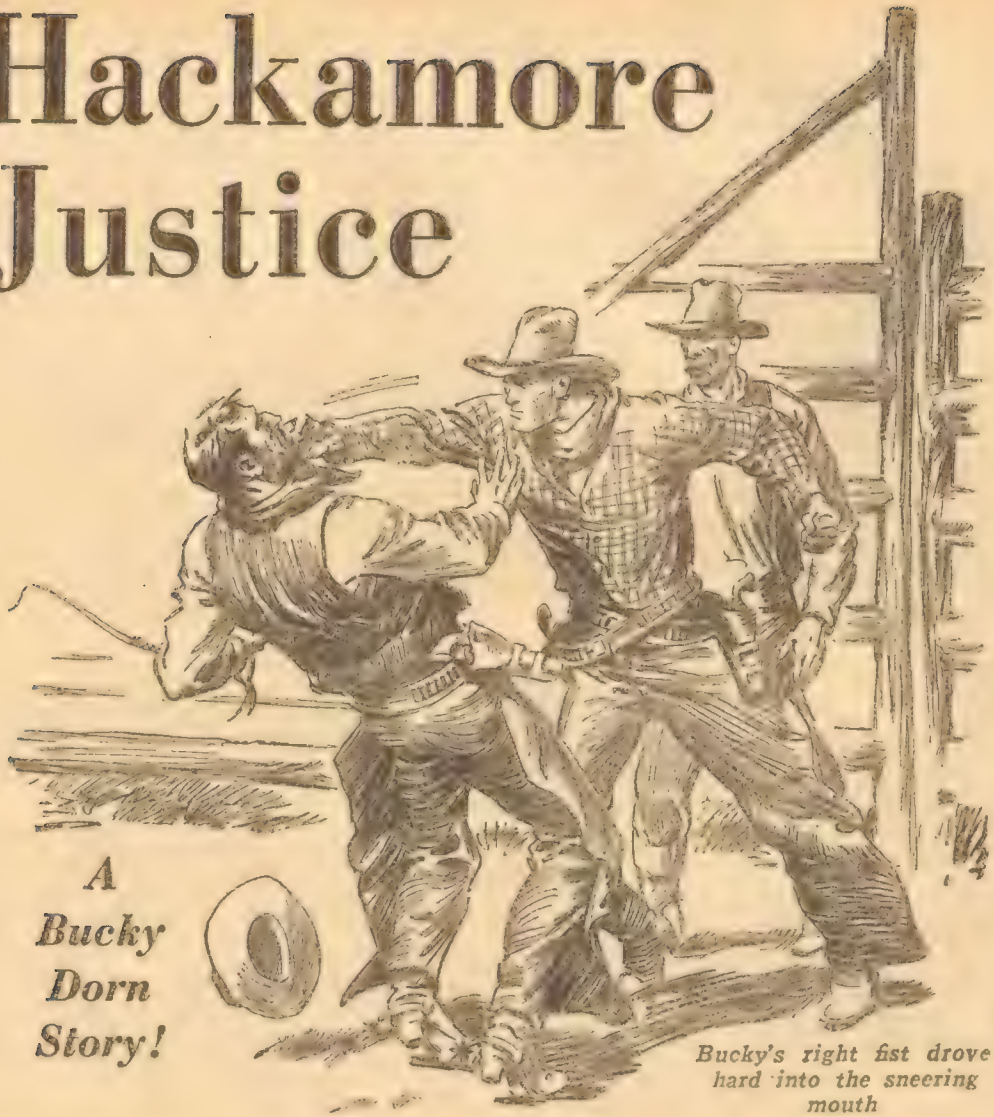

A Bucky Dorn Story!

Bucky's right fist drove hard into the sneering mouth

The Buckaroo Deputy Puts a Hombre Hep to Some Real Hawss-Sense in this Hard-Ridin' Story of Cow Country Law

By CHUCK MARTIN

Author of "Bucky Dorn Rides Home," "Gun Daddy," etc.

SHERIFF "Old John" Tobin rode up the one dusty street of Cochise and creaked down from the saddle at the hitch-rack in front of the adobe jail that also served him as office. He shouted to the slender young deputy who was busy in the corral at the back of the jail.

"Hyar, Bucky! Leave them broomtails an' come a-runnin'!"

Bucky Dorn rested a lean brown hand on the neck of a vicious-look-

ing silver-roan stallion as he glanced up quickly at the old sheriff. Then his blue eyes twinkled while his hands continued to stroke the big roan.

"I'm goin' out tuh see some top-hand hawss-ridin' this mornin," he announced without looking around.

"Yuh ain't doin' no such!" Sheriff Old John shouted. "Not with work a-goin', an' me occupied with my official duties!"

"SHORE," the young deputy agreed carelessly. "I'll serve th' papers an' then git along on out there to th' Circle B!"

"Are you a buckaroo, or my depitty?" the old sheriff asked sneeringly.

"I reckon I'm both," said Bucky Dorn. "Only, I jess wanted tuh watch Tuscon Watts do his stuff this mornin'. Yuh see, Ole John, he's top-hand buckaroo out tuh th' Circle B, an' some of th' boys has been complainin' about th' way he breaks th' new hawsses for their saddle strings."

"Go on," said the sheriff quietly. "What I got tuh say kin wait for a while!"

"Aw, yuh're gittin' sore," said the young deputy. "Yuh see, Ole John, this yere masher has been usin' a Spanish curb with a double bit, an' he rolls th' steel tuh them broomtails until they all carries his own private brand. I thought mebbe I'd show him how tuh ride a bad 'un so's he wouldn't be plumb ruint afterwards!"

"Yuh was a buckaroo when I took yuh fer my depitty, an' I should have left yuh where yuh was," said the old sheriff disgustedly. "But seein' as yuh're duly sworn in as a peace officer, I'm tellin' yuh again that peelin' broncs ain't among yore duties!"

Bucky Dorn grinned. He had been called "Bucky" ever since he had been big enough to straddle a kak, and his riding ability was something that the waddies on the surrounding cattle ranches swore by. They said he had a way even with the wild ones that were trapped in the hills, and even Old John grudgingly swore that the buckaroo deputy cast a spell over the horses he rode.

"I jess ride for pleasure, on th' side," Bucky said. "Runnin' errands for you is what I draws my pay on!"

Old John grimaced sourly.

"Come out o' that corral an' leave that collection of fuzz tails alone," he growled. "Ever' time I send yuh out tuh bring in a man, yuh comes back with a new hawss!"

"Th' gents whut I allus bring back don't need them hawsses no more, an' most allus they asks me tuh look after them," said Bucky Dorn. "Now yuh take that sorrel there, named Trouble."

"You take him," cut in the sheriff. "Throw yore hull aboard him an' then come intuh th' office. There's work agoin', like I done tole yuh!"

THE young deputy's eyes brightened as he watched the retreating figure of the old sheriff. Old John had been complaining about his rheumatism lately, but as long as his temper was working like it had been this morning, the deputy knew he had nothing to worry about.

He loved the old man like a father, in spite of the continued abuse Old John heaped upon him; and he was still grinning as he entered the little office where the sheriff was sitting with his worn boots on the scarred desk. The deputy made a mock salute as he clicked the high heels of his boots together.

"I report fer duty, sir!"

"Yuh can't make a man out of a dang boy," growled the sheriff. "Quit yore clownin' an' git down tuh business. Somebody stole that Arab stud from th' Circle B last night!"

Bucky Dorn was instantly alert.

"Whyn't yuh say so?" he demanded;

"I done tole yuh I was goin' tuh ride out there this mornin'! Didn't I?"

Old John ignored the complaint.

"That Arab ain't never been rode," he explained. "Ole Barstow says that whoever took the stud led him away, him bein' used tuh th' men!"

"He's a big white four-year-old," said Bucky Dorn. "Th' only time he's ever been saddled was when he threw Tuscon Watts last year, an' Jake Barstow come near tuh gunnin' Tuscon for cinchin' a kak on th' thoroughbred. Whut yuh reckon, Ole John?"

"Ever so often yuh show a glimmerin' o' sense," admitted the sheriff grudgingly. "This yere Tuscon Watts has got somethin' tuh do with th' disappearance of th' Arab, an' I want yuh tuh go there an' read th' sign!"

"I'm startin' now," said the deputy.

"I said to read th' sign," repeated the sheriff. "Yuh go tryin' tuh ride a bucker an' yuh draws yore time. Yuh got a serious job, my fine feller, an' I wants yuh tuh take it serious. Savvy?"

"Orders is orders," muttered the young deputy, but for once there was a sullen gleam in his blue eyes. "I won't ride no buckers this yere trip!"

"Hit leather then, an' start a-foggin'," said the sheriff. "I got tuh go tuh court today!"

BUCKY DORN had been top-hand buckaroo on the Circle B when Sheriff Tobin had induced him to accept the job as deputy sheriff of Cochise County. Now he was riding back to the old spread to investigate a theft in which the sheriff had pointed the finger of suspicion at his successor.

Bucky's face was sober as he swung down in front of the ranchhouse and stomped across the broad porch.

Slowly he entered the front room used as an office by Jake Barstow, owner of the Circle B.

"'Mornin', Bucky," greeted the cattleman. "Yuh find out anything?"

"I got a hunch," said the deputy. "How many hawsses has Tuscon got in his own string?"

"Th' one he rode in yere on," said Barstow. "Where's that lead tuh?"

"It leads tuh Mustang Mountain toward th' Border, onless I'm wrong," Bucky answered quietly. "Yuh see, Jake, I cut th' sign of three hawsses over in th' west pasture where that Arab was stole. Th' stallion was barefoot, an' th' tracks of one of th' others was made by a li'l Spanish hawss. Th' third one was a tall, long-legged hawss with a split frawg in his left front."

"Le's go out to th' breakin' pen," said Barstow. "Tuscon is workin' a bunch o' wild ones today."

THE two men walked across the yard to the riding pen, where the dust was rising in thick clouds. Bucky Dorn felt as though he were home again as he climbed to the top rail and hooked his heel over the middle bar. For three years he had worked inside that same corral, breaking the wild ones the horse trappers caught in the hills. Now his blue eyes were fixed upon the long-legged rider who had just emerged from a cloud of alkali.

The little black eyes of Tuscon Watts drew down to slits as he pretended not to see the two men. The wrangler had just pulled the blindfold from the eyes of the vicious little claybank mare after casting off the ropes that snubbed her to the post, and now the mare was doing her best to buck the hated burden from her back.

As her head went down between her forelegs, the tall rider jerked on the Spanish curb bit with all the strength of his arm. With a squeal of pain and terror, the little mare reared high on her hind legs, and then the buckaroo smashed her across the head with his right hand as the

cruel rowels gashed along the heaving flanks.

Bucky Dorn was gripping the top rail until the knuckles of his strong hands showed white through the tan. His jaw was set in a stern line, his blue eyes blazed dangerously. And then, forgetting the man at his side, he shouted at the grinning buckaroo in the corral.

"Quit scratchin' that mare," he yelled. "That ain't no way tuh ride!"

THE mare was sunfishing madly now, and Tuscon Watts merely grinned again without looking up. Then the sharp spurs again rolled the steel to the bleeding flanks, and with a shrill scream of pain the little mare started running. Around and around the corral she raced, the tall rider throwing her away from the rails at the corners with the cruel Spanish curb.

Bucky Dorn watched in silence until the mare stopped in the center of the pen with head nearly touching the ground as the bloody foam dripped from her gaping jaws. Her legs were spraddled out as if she were about to fall. And then the buckaroo roweled her again and rode around the corral before slipping insolently from the saddle.

"Anybody kin ride her now," he said, as he faced the two men on the rail. "When I break a hawss, it stays broke!"

"I'd like tuh put a kak on you, an' ride yuh like yuh rode that mare," gritted Bucky Dorn. "Yuh cheap tinhorn!"

Like the striking flash of a rattler, the right hand of the horse breaker darted down to the heavy gun on his right leg. The right hand of Bucky Dorn scarcely moved, but now he was covering the other; the barrel of his .45 pointed unwaveringly at the lean stomach of Tuscon Watts.

Watts sneered as his hand fell away from the open holster.

"All set fer me, wasn't yuh?" he snarled. "Wasn't takin' any chances!"

Instantly the young deputy snapped the gun back into his holster as his high heels hit the dust inside the corral. Then he raised his right hand shoulder high, facing the tall cowboy with narrowed eyes.

"Fill yore hand an' start a-smokin'," he grated in a whisper. "Draw —yuh polecat!"

A look of fear swept across Watt's face as he faced the crouching deputy. He sighed with relief as Jake Barstow jumped to the ground and stepped between them.

"Yuh're fired, Tuscon!" Barstow kept his back to Bucky as he glared at the rider. "Come up tuh th' house an' git yore time!"

"Is this depitty goin' tuh quit sheriffin' an take my job?" asked Watts sneeringly. "Not that he's any great shucks at either."

The next instant his shoulders struck the ground as Bucky Dorn stepped forward and drove his right fist against the sneering mouth. Again Jake Barstow stepped between the two men, and Tuscon wiped the blood from his lips as he stumbled to his feet.

"I'll git yuh fer that some day, cowboy," he snarled.

HIS temper as quickly under control as it had slipped, Bucky Dorn turned away with a shamed flush on his young face. His two years under the old sheriff had not been long enough to teach him that personal quarrels were something that a peace officer had to avoid. Now he quietly watched the tall buckaroo, as Watts unsaddled the weaving mare and then carried his riding gear to another corral where he proceeded to rope a rangy sorrel.

Bucky was still standing by the riding pen when Tuscon Watts rode past him with a scowl; and suddenly the eyes of the deputy sparkled as he

glanced on the ground. The rangy sorrel was taking long steps toward the ranchhouse, and each time he put his feet to the ground, a cleft showed in the heavy dust—and the cleft was in that left front hoof!

Jake Barstow, watching from the house, saw Bucky nod his head slightly as he wandered carelessly toward the water trough.

"I'VE been watchin' yuh fer some time," the cattleman said when Tuscon Watts reached him. "I know yuh got tuh handle some of them broomtails rough, but yore style don't appeal none tuh me. When yuh gits through cuttin' up a hawss with th' steel an' usin' that curb bit, it hain't fit fer crow bait. Th' boys has been complainin' fer a month now."

"Yuh fired me, didn't yuh?" demanded Watts. "That's all there is to it, an' yuh kin all go tuh blazes if yuh don't like my style!"

He snatched the money from the hand of the cattleman and stomped to the door. He was silent until he had vaulted into the saddle of the rangy sorrel, and then he turned again with a scowl, his hand close to the heavy gun on his bull-hide chaps.

"Yuh never had but one good hawss on th' hull spread," he sneered. "As fer that smart depitty, he'll wish he had minded his own business!"

Ignoring the threat of the hand near the six-gun, Jake Barstow reached for his own weapon as he rushed forward. Tuscon Watts threw the hooks to his horse as the irate cattleman charged out with drawn .45, and then he was gone in a pitching cloud of sifting dust.

Bucky Dorn came running across the yard as soon as he heard the drumming hoofs.

"Cool down, Jake," he soothed. "It worked jess like I said it would."

"He said he was goin' tuh git yuh, an' then he made a crack about me havin' only one decent hawss on th' spread," growled the cattleman.

Bucky Dorn nodded.

"An' now he's gone tuh pick up th' Arab, jess like we figgered," he said. "Guess I'll be ridin', Jake!"

"Take care o' yoreself, Bucky," warned Barstow. "He'll bushwhack yuh, shore as sin. Th' Arab ain't wuth it, th' way that murderous buckaroo is feelin'!"

"I come out yere tuh catch a hawss thief," said the deputy. "I'm goin' tuh catch him, Jake, or else I'll never straddle another bad 'un again. Ole John don't like it nohow when I gets tuh peelin' a bronc!"

"Sheriff Ole John didn't mean nuthin' serious," the cattleman said soothingly. "He jess likes tuh ride yuh, Bucky."

"Ole John tole me I was jess a boy," said the deputy soberly. "It's time I was growin' up, Jake, whut with th' sheriff gittin' along in years. An' I ain't never goin' tuh step across a bucker again till Ole John asks me to. If yuh sees him afore I gits back, tell him I'm headin' fer Mustang Mountain!"

Jake Barstow watched the deputy ride down the trail, and then his squinting eyes smiled as a thought struck him.

"Bucky loves that ole rascal, an' Ole John will do it sartin'," he chuckled.

IT was a sober, grim-faced young man who rode south and west toward Mustang Mountain, following the tracks of the sorrel with the cleft in the left front hoof. Bucky Dorn seemed indeed to have grown up since he had left Sheriff Old John Tobin at the little adobe jail in Cochise.

The sorrel he was riding was nearly as tall as the one ridden by Tuscon Watts, but the young deputy knew that his own horse was the better animal. "Trouble" had be-

longed to a robber who had given the horse to Bucky after his capture by the deputy, and the animal had transferred his one-man affections to the man who had conquered and ridden him in a fair battle. Bucky Dorn was thinking about that wild ride as he followed the trail of the cleft hoof toward Mustang Mountain.

"Hit ain't necessary tuh use a curb bit if a feller kin really ride," he muttered. "Hits askin' fer an advantage, an' admittin' that th' hawss is the best man of th' two!"

The cholla cactus was giving way to purple sage when he sighted the foothills ahead. He reined in the big sorrel as he skirted a thicket of prickly pear, and then he smiled grimly as he saw a horse silhouetted against the skyline above.

Bucky knew the distance to be about three miles, and after waiting a half hour, he once more gave Trouble his head. The intelligent animal seemed to know what was expected of him, as he climbed the twisting trail at a slow walk.

THE sun disappeared behind the peak of Old Baldy in the distance and as the shadows grew heavier, the young deputy reined the sorrel off the trail and slipped from the saddle behind a wind-break of scrub pines. His plan was already thought out—and he smiled to himself as he thought of Tuscon Watts spending a wakeful night watching for him while he was getting a sound sleep.

Picketing the sorrel on his lass rope, Bucky removed the heavy saddle and bridle and rubbed the sweating horse with dry grass until he shone like satin. Then he ate a cold snack taken from his saddle bags, as he rested his shoulders against the saddle.

The buckaroo up ahead would be sure to see a fire, but tobacco smoke was different. Bucky poured and rolled a brownie which he smoked with the outdoor man's keen appreciation. Ten minutes later he was sound asleep, with his head pillowed on the saddle and the Navajo thrown over his shoulders for protection against the night wind.

THE first light of the false dawn found him bathing his face and hands in a little stream which trickled between the rocks back in a little canyon, and he was in the saddle before the sun was over the rimrock above. Eyes keenly alert, he watched the trail ahead. He stopped the sorrel with a low word as the sensitive ears pricked forward. A step off to the side of the narrow trail, and then he peered through the branches of a brush screen at the tall man who was watching the trail.

Bucky Dorn suddenly started to whistle soundlessly as he removed his droopy Stetson and shoved it between two small twigs of the heavy brush. Then he began creeping to the rear without making a sound, and after crossing the trail he crouched back to wait.

The minutes ticked away slowly with no sound except the buzzing of insects. Then the deputy stiffened as a shadow fell across the trail.

The tall frame of Tuscon Watts was bent over in a crouch as he held the heavy six-gun before him, his little eyes murderous as he watched that hat in the brush. Cautiously he slid forward, still holding the gunman's crouch, and Bucky Dorn smiled softly to himself as he held his breath.

"Claw th' air, feller!"

Tuscon was in the trail now, squarely in back of the Stetson in the brush. He waited for a moment after his command, and then his gun was thrust forward viciously as his heavy voice snapped another warning.

"Git 'em up—git 'em up, or I'll plug yuh!"

Now Bucky Dorn slid forward, the

same grim smile on his face, and then his Colt was out to jam the spine of Tuscon Watts with the long barrel. The buckaroo jerked quickly, and the gun fell from his hand as he slowly reached for the blue sky.

"Yeah, it's me," said Bucky dryly. "I'm glad yuh didn't perforate that ole Stetson yonder. I'm sorta attached to that sky-piece, an' I might have took it personal!"

"Reg'lar Sherlock, ain't yuh?" growled the horse breaker. "Yuh allus gits yore man!"

"Men an' polecats; it's all one tuh me," grinned Bucky. "Jess reach down an' onfasten that cartridge belt, an' let it fall tuh th' ground. Then yuh kin put yore hands behind yore back."

A SHARP click and Tuscon Watts was handcuffed as he swung around to face his captor. Bucky drew the belt back with his boot and hung it on his arm as he motioned the other ahead.

"I got muh hawss right yere," he said. "Yuh kin walk ahead till yuh comes to yore hawss, an' then we'll go on tuh the li'l corral yuh was headin' for!"

"Yuh ain't got a thing on me," growled the horse breaker. "This stunt is just goin' to cost yuh yore star."

"Mebbe," said the deputy. "But let us git on up there, an' see whut we can see!"

He helped the manacled man to the saddle and ordered him to head the way up the narrow trail. Tuscon Watts glowered as he was forced to obey, and a half hour later the two came out on a little mesa. The flat tableland covered perhaps a dozen acres, and the deputy smiled when he saw the pole corral at the upper end.

The white Arab was in the enclosure, and Tuscon growled as Bucky Dorn took a scrawled paper from a corner post near the top rail and read aloud:

Senor Tuscon:

I covered the tracks well, and you will find the white one in the pen. I will meet you in Nogales one week from today.

Hasta luego,

Ramos.

"Hast luego; so you are to meet again," whispered Bucky. "And he delivered the Arab here for you, right side up with care!"

"Whut if he did?" growled the prisoner "Yuh're a right smart *hombre,* ain't yuh?"

"Jess this smart," said the deputy. "Th' tracks showed where yuh roped the Arab, 'cause that split frog in the left front hoof of yore hawss was all over th' place. Then yuh met another gent with a shod hawss who led th' Arab away. Seein' as how he piled yuh higher than Ole Baldy th' time yuh tried tuh ride him, it was plain whut yuh had on yore mind!"

"I aimed tuh ride that Arab or die a-tryin' to," said the horse breaker. "I also seen yuh a-follerin' me, an' yuh was goin' tuh have a ringside seat afore I paid yuh off fer buttin' in!"

"They ain't no reason why we should change yore plans as long as they were th' same as mine," said Bucky softly.

TUSCON WATTS jerked his head up quickly and looked at the young deputy with suspicion.

"Whut yuh mean, yore plans was th' same as mine?" he growled.

"Jess whut yuh said," grinned Bucky. "Yuh're goin' tuh ride that there Arab, an' I'm goin' tuh have a ringside seat, with Cunnel Colt in my hand, tuh see that yuh don't cheat none. This is one ride that yuh're goin' tuh make straight up, an' without no handicaps. Git down offen that hawss!"

He covered the puzzled buckaroo until the latter slid to the ground,

and then the young deputy dismounted and walked up to his prisoner. Taking a key from the pocket he faced the wondering man grimly.

"Hold out them hands!" As the one cuff was unlocked, the deputy pointed to the corral. "Get yore rope an' snub that Arab down to th' post, an' then strip yore ridin' gear so's yuh kin saddle him. Yuh're goin' tuh ride that Arab, puncher!"

"Yuh're crazy, but I'll ride him," sneered Watts.

Taking the rope from his saddle, he loosened the cinches and let the heavy hull slip to the ground. Then he climbed the bars of the corral and made a deft throw with his rope. A minute later the head of the Arab was snubbed down to the heavy post, and Tuscon Watts grabbed the heavy saddle which Bucky had pushed under the bottom rail.

After a struggle the saddle was cinched on the snorting stallion. The buckaroo started to climb the bars.

"Whoa!" shouted Bucky Dorn. "Where yuh goin'?"

"Tuh git my bridle, yuh pore idiot," snarled Watts.

"Guess again," said Bucky. "This yere is goin' tuh be a little o' my way. Yuh're goin' tuh ride him straight up with this, after yuh shuck them spurs offen yore boots!"

HE took a heavy hackamore from behind his saddle and tossed it on the ground. Tuscon Watts scowled at it for a minute and then picked it up as the deputy made a threatening motion with the six-gun in his hand. Bucky grinned as he watched the trembling fingers adjust the heavy hack on the jerking head of the Arab, and then the cruel spurs were unfastened and tossed aside.

"Now th' honor is all yores," said Bucky. "He ain't never been rode afore, an' seein' as yuh're th' top-hand buckaroo in these parts, slap leather an' do yore stuff. Git goin'!"

Tuscon Watts glared at him for a moment, and then vaulted in the saddle before the Arab suspected his intention. As the rope was cast off, the Arab leaped into the air like a missile from a slingshot.

Tuscon yanked savagely on the rope attached to the heavy hackamore, and his arm was nearly pulled from its socket as the hurtling head was plunged down between the forelegs of the stallion. Tuscon made a quick recovery as his boots snugged down in the ox-bow stirrups, and Bucky Dorn whooped encouragement.

"Ride 'im, cowboy!" he shrilled. "Take 'im tuh town!"

IF Tuscon Watts heard he was too busy to make answer. The white stallion was treating him to a different brand of bucking than he had ever experienced, and the hackamore was also different from the Spanish curb bit that could break the jaw of a stubborn horse. Now he was riding the plunging beast straight up, because he knew he would be jerked from the saddle if he held the hack rope when the head of the Arab was plunged down.

Plain and fancy bucking, crow-hopping and sunfishing; the stallion pitched tirelessly as his bunched feet jolted time after time into the hard ground. Three times the tall rider shamelessly choked leather, and each time his fingernails were nearly torn out by the roots as the plunging Arab swapped ends like a great steel spring.

Bucky Dorn was not shouting now as he watched the duel in the riding pen. The Arab was tiring, but Tuscon Watts was also swaying dizzily in the saddle. The stallion seemed to sense this, too, for he reared up on his hind legs with a lurch that brought a yell from his rider.

As the horse seemed about to topple over backward, Tuscon reached out and slammed his right fist be-

tween the pointed ears. Down came the small head with a roar of rage—so quickly that Tuscon did not have time to recover.

Straight between the spread forelegs went the head—and then the stallion arched his back with a jerk that sent Tuscon Watts flying through space, his arms outstretched like the wings of a great bird. Over and over he turned before he landed outside the corral. For a moment he quivered, before he lay still.

BUCKY DORN slipped down from his saddle and fastened the dangling handcuff around the right wrist. He was hunkered down smoking a quirly when Tuscon at last opened his eyes, and he knew from the involuntary lurch that the horse breaker thought he was still riding the Arab who was standing quietly in the riding pen.

"Yuh're in th' clear," said the deputy softly. "Th' stud threw yuh clean over th' top rails. Yuh cert'n'y did join the bird gang that time, puncher!"

"Did I make a ride, or didn't I?" demanded the fallen man.

"That there's th' best ride yuh ever made in all yore born days," said the deputy. "Whyn't yuh ride like that all th' time, 'stead o' usin steel an curb bits?"

"Yuh're plumb right," said the horse breaker, slowly and with an effect. "After I serves my time, I'm goin' tuh ride 'em different. It tuck a fall like that tuh show me whut an ornery polecat I been, an' it tuck a ride like that'un tuh show me that I really could ride straight up if I wanted tuh do it!"

"That there's whut I reely calls hackamore justice," said the young deputy. "Do yuh think yuh had it comin', puncher?"

"I had it comin' an' I got it," said Tuscon. "Depitty, I shore been one ornery buckaroo with hawsses. Let's go on in tuh jail!"

"Jail, yore foot," said Bucky Dorn, as he unlocked the handcuffs from the horse breaker's wrists. "That Arab leads behind th' saddle like a lamb, an' Jake Barstow says yuh're tuh take him on back there an' throw him in th' west pasture.

"Then yuh throws yore soogans in th' bunkhouse and gets busy on a new bunch o' broom tails he's got comin' out o' th' hills next week. Jake says he'll need them hawsses fer round-up!"

"Gosh! Yuh mean I ain't under arrest?" stuttered Tuscon. "Yuh mean Jake ain't tuh goin' tuh push th' charge?"

For answer Bucky Dorn took the note from the pocket of his chaps and struck a match. When the last charred embers had fallen to the ground, he rubbed them into the dust with his boot.

"They ain't no evidence," he said. "We all make mistakes, Tuscon, an' any gent that sees th' error of his ways is entitled tuh a break. Let's us git on back tuh Cochise, an' mebbe th' big Auger won't dock yuh fer these two days yuh been huntin' back yere on Mustang Mountain with me. An' we'll jess keep still about that there Hackamore Justice!"

Say, Rannihan or Rannigal! Do Yuh Belong tuh

THE RANGE RIDER'S CLUB?

If Not, Join Up Pronto! They's A Coupon on Page 128!

COLT LAW

"Six-Gun"

A **SANDY** adventure in pictures

In the glow of an oil lamp burning above his head Six-Gun Sandy reads a reward notice for the elusive Rider in Grey. This outlaw has been terrorizing the surrounding country. "I've shore got tuh catch that *hombre,*" the young sheriff murmurs. He grabs for his gun. There is a shadowy figure lurking outside the window. The skulking form vanishes. With his gun ready, Sandy swings around to face the half-open door!

Outside, a masked man, dressed entirely in grey, whirls quickly from the window. He has seen the sheriff grabbing for his gun. "I'll get that *hombre* afore he gets me!" mumbles the Rider in Grey.

Realizing that he presents a perfect target, sitting in the lighted office, Sandy raises his gun. The heavy Colt roars and a bullet smashes the lamp. He leaps to his feet in the darkness!

The sheriff swiftly opens the door. "Who's there?" he snaps as he peers out into the night. For an instant silence is his only answer. Then the clatter of a galloping horse. He fires wildly!

Sandy rushes to the saloon, sees a crowd gathered around a corpse. "Shore looks like trouble," he murmurs. "Deuce Slade will say I let th' Rider get away!" He drops something into his boot.

[*Turn page*]

Ominous glances greet the young sheriff as he joins the group. "It's yore deputy, Bull Martin," snarls Deuce Slade, the leader of the shady faction in the town. "An' he was murdered, shot twice in the back!" Slade streaks for his gun, covers Sandy. "An' we just heard yuh fire two shots! Yuh killed the deputy 'cause yuh knew he was next in line fer yore job!" Sandy protests hotly. He has been framed!

Urged on by Slade's followers, the crowd seethes with anger. "I didn't kill Bull," shouts Sandy. "It was the Rider in Grey. I fired at him." Slade laughs harshly. A club crashes on the sheriff's head!

"Colt Law," says Slade, "that rules here!" Sandy is locked in a cell. Slade, thinking him unconscious, speaks freely. "Yuh boys rustle th' Bar X herd. I'll stay in town. Th' Rider in Grey will give yuh orders."

Alone in the jail, Sandy reaches into his boot and extracts the key to his cell. "Glad I thought o' this key," he smiles grimly. He takes a pair of six-guns. Outside, there is a howling mob!

Swiftly Sandy leaps out the front door. Both of his guns flame death. Bullets spatter about him. His appearance has been too sudden for anyone to realize what is happening. He cuts his way through the mob!

Riding madly, Sandy reaches the Bar X ranch in record time. "Rustlers after yore herd!" he shouts. "Come on!" Men pour from the bunkhouse. Hastily they rope and saddle their mounts.

With thundering hoofs they gallop toward the herd, the young sheriff in the lead. Guns roar as the Bar X rannies sight the oncoming rustlers. Men and horses go down. The air is filled with the acrid tang of powder-smoke. "I'll get him!" shouts Sandy as he spies the Rider in Grey. The young sheriff wants to capture the Rider alive, force him to confess he killed the deputy. Sandy wounds the Rider, who escapes.

The next day Sandy is back in the little cowtown. He is searching for a man who has been wounded in the right arm. On the street, he meets Deuce Slade. "Yore under arrest, Slade," snaps Sandy. "Mebbe yuh were in town at th' time but it was yore men that tried tuh rustle th' Bar X herd." Realizing that he is cornered, Slade draws his gun. Fast as lightning, Sandy's Colts roar. Slade crumples, falls.

Swiftly Sandy examines Slade —and finds a bullet in his right arm! "Yore the Rider in Grey, an' yuh killed Martin!" Sandy accuses. Slade dies with a confession on his lips. Again Sandy and the law have won!

Next Month: SIX-GUN SANDY in SILVER BULLETS

The Gun-Shy Kid

Jim Powell Wasn't Particularly Fond of Drawing His Shooting Irons—But He Sure Was Out to Avenge the Killing of His Brother!

A Complete Novelette

By JAY J. KALEZ

Author of "El Viborito," "The Texan Tamer," etc.

CHAPTER I

The Border Way

EVERY man of the dozen or more cowhands lined at the bar of the Roundup Saloon, lifted his eyes for a glance at the slim, lanky, dust-caked young man loudly stamping the alkali from his boots as he stood barely within the saloon's swinging doors. There was that about him that commanded a glance.

Perhaps it was the way his faded blue eyes peered from beneath the rim of his weather-limp Stetson. Perhaps it was the way he hitched his brace of two guns higher on his hips. The room took on a hush as the jingle of his spurs traced his course to the bar.

The slim young man pushed his way into an opening at the rail.

"I'm a-huntin' information, Mister Bartender," he called in a slow, purring drawl. "Yuh-all know a two-legged skunk 'round these parts what calls hisself Brant Hawkins?" The pale eyes shifted to take in those at the bar. "That goes fer yuh gents, too," he added.

The line-up at the bar shifted uneasily. Brant Hawkins' name was always spoken with respect about Sage City. His Crowfoot brand, with its scatter of smaller spreads dotting the Basin, employed an army of hands. Hard riding, trouble hunting hands. At that very moment, the stranger to the Roundup Saloon stood between a pair of them.

Even the toughest home-range ranny, in his drunkest moments, knew better than to shout down Brant Hawkins within the Roundup barroom. The Roundup was the Crowfoot nesting spot when town-bound.

The bartender attempted to head off the gun-play he saw brewing. Spot Gordon, the Crowfoot hand on the stranger's right, never missed a chance at trouble. He was turning now to half-face the newcomer.

"Yeah," the bartender managed to speak. "There's a Brant Hawkins in town. He jest left here a bit ago."

The stranger reached out for the bottle the bartender had automatically set before him.

"Reckon I tracked proper," he announced evenly. "I'm leavin' word fer him with yuh all. See he gits it. Tell 'im from sundown on, when he shows hisself in public, tuh show with his shootin' irons strapped on. I'm killin' 'im on sight. *Compre, amigo?*"

In the hush of his words, the

The kid fired at the gun-flash

stranger tipped the bottle in his hand and filled his glass. He started to lift the drink to his lips, but his hand poised midway. In the mirror beyond the bar he caught the snarling face of Spot Gordon peering over his shoulder. The Crowfoot man had slipped silently behind him. The gun in his hand poked its muzzle deep into the stranger's back.

"Yuh'll be downin' that liquor tuh the health o' Mr. Brant Hawkins, stranger," Spot Gordon's strained voice droned out. "That's if yuh're figgerin' on it hittin' your innards without leakin' out again."

THE stranger did not move. His pale eyes searched the mirror behind the bar for every detail of the set-up about him. Spot Gordon's yellow teeth showed behind his rolled lips.

His gun pressed deeper.

The stranger straightened slowly. His glass of liquor lifted higher.

"Tuh Mister Brant Hawkins," he spoke, emotionlessly. "A murderin' skunk in pants."

With his words the liquor in the stranger's hand went splashing backward into Spot Gordon's face. In the same move his arm lashed down behind his back to strike the gun muzzle in his ribs aside, as he pivoted on his heels. Spot's gun roared, its lead spattering against the bar foot-rail.

As by magic, a gun had appeared in the stranger's hand. Its barrel slashed cross-wise with the speed of a striking snake. Spot Gordon caved forward, an ugly cut across his temple. The stranger took a quick step back.

"Anybody else takin' things personal?" he called in his unhurried drawl as he dangled his gun from its trigger guard. The pale eyes shifted the length of the bar as he carelessly kicked Spot Gordon's dropped gun across the floor.

An instant of silence, and with a spin of the weapon in his hand, the stranger shoved it back into his holster.

"Yuh'll be rememberin' what I tol' yuh, Mister Bartender," he tossed over his shoulder as he backed toward the doorway. "I start gunnin' at sundown."

He was almost to the door. Behind the bar, the open-mouthed bartender managed to find his voice.

"Who'll I say made them remarks, stranger?" he called. "Don't recollect yuh callin' yore brand."

"Don't recollect I intended tuh," was the answer. "But now yuh're askin', yuh might mention Hip Powell's brother was in town. That ought to fix Mr. Hawkins' mem'ry. Case that don't suit, jest say the Gun-Shy Kid's out to boost yore Boot-Hill population, 'round about sundown. *Adios.*"

With that, the Gun-Shy Kid backed through the doorway. Behind the bar, the bartender watched and blinked. Slowly his face clouded. The Gun-Shy Kid—Hip Powell's brother—things had a meaning now.

Six months back, Hip Powell had taken lease on a piece of government land on the edge of the Basin and started running his own brand. A month back, Hip had been burned out, lock, stock and barrel. His body was found alongside the ruins, a rifle bullet in his back. Though some range folk wagged their heads knowingly, no one risked an open verdict. It was not the first time an independent leaser and his outfit had been wiped out in the Basin.

OUTSIDE, the Gun-Shy Kid had mounted a rangy, coal-black stallion and swung down the street. Hardly had he cleared the Roundup hitching-rack when two men cautiously pushed their way past the saloon's swinging doors. One hurriedly crossed the street and entered

the doors of the bank, opposite. The other attempted to keep the Kid in sight as he jogged his stallion along.

The watching cowhand had not long to wait. Hardly had his companion disappeared into the bank, when the Kid swung his stallion into the rack before the general store of Dad Drummond, Sage City's veteran independent merchant. At the sight, the second cowhand himself hurried toward the bank.

Inside the bank, a square-built man with head fastened to shoulders in a manner reminiscent of a toad, was listening in silence to the first cowhand. His heavy lips twitched nervously.

"Hip Powell's brother, eh?" he mumbled in a toneless voice. "Didn't know there was any o' the squattin' breed left."

The cowhand messenger nodded solemnly.

"Handles a gun like he knowed plenty o' tricks," he said pessimistically. "I wouldn't be takin' no chances, Mr. Hawkins."

The second cowhand from the Roundup entered.

"He piled off in front o' Dad Drummond's place," he quickly informed. "Looks like he's lightin' there fer a spell."

Brant Hawkins' lips twisted into a smile.

"DAD DRUMMOND'S place, eh?" he repeated. "Good. Tell Spot tuh git Lopez an' start things. Tell 'im tuh take no chances. I'll have the sheriff handy. An' you might tell him, things as they are, if ol' Drummond took a stray bullet under his belt I don't reckon it would be hard explainin' to the sheriff.

"If that young wildcat wants gunplay, he'll git it. Git plenty, an' afore sundown."

Five minutes later, Spot Gordon, Brant Hawkins' ace gunhand, was trailing slowly down the street in the direction of Dad Drummond's store. A few paces behind him, a slope-shouldered Mexican followed. His hat pulled low over his eyes, Spot moved in alongside the steps leading to the porch before the general store. There he paused and, with back to the porch, leaned against its side.

The Mexican drifted on by and took up a position in front of the hitching-rack. At the same moment, across the street a half-dozen men scattered themselves along the line of buildings and, under the pretext of a dozen plausible reasons, paused or halted.

Brant Hawkins was planting witnesses as well as killers!

INSIDE the store, Dad Drummond was talking too earnestly with his serious-faced visitor to notice the maneuvers about his store steps. His voice held a fatherly tone.

"Yuh shouldn't 've gone huntin' fer trouble, Kid," old Dad scolded. "I wouldn't of wrote you if I'd known yuh was gonna tear in here loco-like. Hawkins' gun-hand 'll drygulch yuh, first time yuh turn yore back."

The Gun-Shy Kid grinned.

"Reckon I been ridin' the Hoot-Owl trail long 'nuff so that won't worry me none," he offered. "'Sides, I hit this yere trail tuh kill the skunk that murdered Hip. Sundown 'll see me headed Border-way, I'm a-thinkin'."

Old man Drummond shook his head solemnly.

"Yuh're fergettin' sumpin', Kid," he spoke earnestly. "This is book-law range. I didn't send fer yuh tuh come yere tuh deal out any one-man law. Hip wa'n't the only independent in these parts hangin' on tuh what he had by his toe-nails. There's a dozen more, includin' myself.

"Our only hope is tuh have somebody force Hawkins' hand in a le-

gal way. Somebody right able tuh take keer o' hisself whilst he's a-doin' it. Thet's why I wrote yuh, Kid.

"When Hip checked in, him and Jed Crowley was gittin' out an injunction against Hawkins, tuh stop by law his fencin' the gov'ment range waterholes. As Hip's only relation, by law, yuh're the one kin carry that injunction on. Jed Crowley's willin', but—"

DAD DRUMMOND cut his words. Through the window of the store the hitching-rack showed plainly. A single rider had just swung in. His leathery brown face was easily recognizable as he pulled his horse alongside the Kid's hitched mount.

A smile transformed the Kid's face as he caught sight of the rider. During his youngster days he had always felt deep admiration for his older brother's hard-riding partner, Jed Crowley. Here was Jed now.

"Reckon Jed 'll be right s'prised tuh see yuh, Kid," Dad Drummond offered as he caught the Kid's grin. "Jed's the one been keepin' me posted on that gun-hand reputation yuh been makin' fer yoreself down 'long the Border. He done brought in every letter yuh'd write Hip, an' let—"

Dad Drummond's words caught. His face jerked sober. So did the Kid's. From the hitching-rack came the protesting squeal of a horse. The Kid's mount reared back and attempted to jerk its reins free. Alongside the rack stood the Mexican that had trailed the gun-hand, Spot, from the Roundup Saloon.

At the rear of the Kid's mount, Jed Crowley was squeezed in his saddle. He attempted to swing his own horse clear. With the move he caught a toss of the Mexican's hand, standing on the clear side of the rack. A powdery spray sailed into the face of the Kid's stallion.

"Hey, you, Mex," Jed Crowley's voice boomed. "Whatcha tossin' intuh that animal's face? Yuh—"

Deliberately, the Mexican gave another quick toss of his hand. The Kid, already to the store porch, caught the move. He leaped to the steps.

"Tossin' pepper, yuh low-down greaser," he bellowed as he rushed past an apparent bystander at the store steps. "Yuh—"

The Kid seemed to whirl in mid-air. His gun hand lashed down. Before the muzzle of his weapon could clear its holster, two shots, one upon the other, roared through the street. A lead slug ticked the brim of the Kid's Stetson.

The Kid saw the man that had been standing alongside the store steps slump slowly forward. As he fell, the smoking gun in his hand dangled from his lifeless fingers. A dozen feet away, still atop his horse, Jed Crowley leaned forward. A smoking gun was in his hand.

The Mexican had vanished beneath the heads of the now frightened horses along the rack. Spot Gordon's lifeless form lay asprawl.

"HE was drawin' down on yuh, stranger," Jed Crowley called down from his saddle. "Looked like some kinda trick with that Mex. Reckon he'd separated yuh from yore backbone, hadn't I—"

Jed's words faded. He was staring blankly at the Kid.

"Gun-Shy!" he suddenly bellowed. "Why, yuh tick-eaten son—"

A gun roared from across the street. A bullet crashed through the window beside where Dad Drummond stood in the doorway of his store. Another followed. Then another.

The Kid, screened by the hitched horses, leaped past the rack. Across the street, the Mexican stood crouched in a doorway, firing wildly

toward Dad Drummond. His gunplay brought a second and a third gun into action from Hawkins' scatter of ready men.

LEAPING clear of the horses, the Kid sent a hail of lead into the shadows opposite. His spattering bullets sent Hawkins' men scattering for cover. The Kid, continuing to fire, saw from the corner of his eye a rush of men pouring from the direction of the Roundup Saloon.

Above the thunder of shots he caught the bellow of Dad Drummond's voice.

"Hit leather!" Dad was shouting. "Hell's gonna pop yere. That's the sheriff's outfit a-comin'."

The Kid took a step toward his horse. From a doorway across the street a tardy gun roared. The Kid fired at the flame-flash.

A grunt from almost above him caused him to sweep a quick glance up. A curse dribbled from his lips. Jed Crowley was clinching the horn of his saddle in an effort to steady himself. His head was dropping forward. Now, weakly, he collapsed and slid from saddle leather into the Kid's arms. A red smear already stained his shirt front.

"Hit leather, Kid," Dad Drummond's voice blasted again in the Kid's ear as he dragged Jed beyond the hitch-rack. "This is part o' Hawkins' trap. He wants yuh tuh try an' shoot it out. Hit fer open country and drift back after dark. Yuh haven't a chance buckin' the sheriff's outfit. I'll take keer o' Jed."

The rushing crowd in the street was now almost upon the Kid. As they poured forward, those from across the street began again to show themselves. One glance told the Kid the hopelessness of any attempt to hold out.

Running forward at a crouch, he reached his horse. The string of animals along the rack acted as a screen. A jerk of his hitched reins free from the rack and the Kid caught one stirrup. A wild yell and his mount whirled and leaped clear of the rack.

Riding the one stirrup, the Kid urged the animal on. Over the seat of his saddle he hurled a scatter of shots to clear his way. Amid a hail of lead the Gun-Shy Kid headed for the edge of town. From behind him came the pounding hoofs of ready pursuit.

CHAPTER II

The Kid Learns Book Law

CLEARLY the sheriff and his men were no match for the Kid's rangy stallion. Deliberately, the Kid decoyed the posse into the badlands; then, back-tracking, he sat his horse below the edge of a coulée rim and in the gathering dusk watched the sheriff and his men ride by.

It was long after dark, however, before he again approached Sage City and, circling carefully, made his way to the rear of Dad Drummond's store.

Old Dad was on the lookout for the Kid. Quickly he drew him into the shadows.

"How's Jed?" was the Kid's first question, once they were safely in the shadows. "Was he hit bad?"

"He's got a messed-up shoulder," Dad answered. "Reckon it was right deep, but he was able to do his share o' cussin' when they arrested him for killin' Hawkins' gun-hand. Doc dressed it at the jail."

A curse blasted past the Kid's lips. Only a grab of Dad's hand had kept him from hitting his saddle in a bound.

"I gotta get Jed outa that jail," the Kid protested. "That posse that was on my trail 'll be gettin' back

in town any time. No tellin' what they'll try."

"Nothin's likely tuh happen," Dad grinned. "Fer once, luck played with us. Jedge Mann got intuh town t'night. He's yere tuh try Hip and Jed's injunction case, an' it didn't take him long tuh pick up hapenin's about. Hawkins' won't fool none with him."

"What kin a jedge do if Hawkins' hired killers turn loose?" the Kid shot back. "Jedge Lynch 'll about run things, then."

"Reckon the jedge figgered thet out too," Dad answered with a chuckle. "He took keer o' things right off. Deputized a dozen old-timers yere, an' had Jed moved to the jail over at Smoke River. An' that ain't half of it," Dad chuckled on.

"The jedge 's holdin' court in Smoke River all next week. All Jed's got tuh do is ask fer a change of venue and he kin git a trial in Smoke River right off. We've already wired to Cheyenne fer our attorney."

The Kid listened in silence as Dad went on to explain the stroke of luck Judge Mann's presence in Sage City had brought them. The injunction hearing of the Kid's dead brother and Jed Crowley against Brant Hawkins was scheduled to come before Judge Mann during his two-day court session in the county.

WITH Jed Crowley being held for safety in the Smoke River jail, the judge had readily agreed to hold the hearing in the Smoke River court instead, in order that Jed might take the witness stand.

The independents of the Basin had already wired the information to their attorney in Cheyenne, in order that he might not only be present in Smoke River for the hearing, but in order that he might at the same time represent Jed in his trial for the murder of Spot Gordon, to be held in the same session at Smoke River.

"You hit the trail fer Smoke River an' lay low there ontil yuh hear from me," Dad Drummond instructed. "Soon's our attorney hits town, we'll have Hip's estate probated an' turned over tuh you, so's yuh kin be there to back up Hip's claim along with Jed. We've got Brant Hawkins where we wants 'im. He can't try no tricks in the Smoke River court. We'll be on even ground there."

The Kid remained silent as Dad Drummond went on with his final instructions. Dad was talking too many legal terms for the Kid to grasp it all. His past years below the Border had known a far different law. The law of six-gun and lead, man to man. Gun justice was the only justice he knew. But now—

THE Kid still argued with himself as he moved through the darkness toward his horse. Dad Drummond had already vanished in the direction of his store. The Kid was about to hit leather when suddenly he stiffened.

From the direction of Dad's store came a muffled stamping of feet. A moaning groan sounded in the night. The Kid thought he recognized the moan for Dad's. He started running forward. In the blackness, a crouched form popped out of the darkness and, rounding the corner of the building, started for the street.

The Kid's gun leaped into his hand as he too dashed around the corner of the building.

"Hold it, darn yuh!" he shouted at the running form ahead. The sing of lead past his ear was the answer.

The Kid fired once from the hip. In the darkness ahead he saw the racing form stagger and fall. A second spurt of flame lashed back at him. The Kid answered with two quick shots. There was no reply.

An instant the Kid waited. He could not make out his target ahead,

now dissolved against the ground. He started to take a step forward. His foot halted in mid-air. To his ears came the thunder of racing hoofs, from the street ahead. Reason flashed the meaning of the rumbling roar. The posse—they were doubling back into town after losing his trail in the badlands.

Quickly the Kid beat a retreat back toward his horse in the shadows behind Dad Drummond's store. He was too much in the open where he now stood, almost even with the street. As he reached the end of the building around which he had torn in pursuit of the unknown, he stopped short. Someone with a lantern was hurrying toward the stairs that led up to Dad Drummond's living quarters above his store.

The Kid crouched and circled wide. A second person was joining the man with the lantern. In the lantern rays the Kid glimpsed a sprawled body at the foot of the stairs. A sudden fear gripped him. And the excited voice of the man with the lantern justified that fear.

"IT'S Dad Drummond," the man called to the second hurrying form beyond. "Some skunk stuck a knife in his back."

Only the realization of the accusation his presence in the darkness might bring kept the Kid from rushing to Dad Drummond's side. A cold chill of hate swept over him. He remembered the shots that had crashed into the windows of Dad's store during the shooting affair of that afternoon. Those shots had not been stray ones. Someone was out to get Dad. That someone could be but one person. The same person that had tried to trap him. Brant Hawkins!

In the darkness, the Kid's jaws set. He must play his hand alone now. Dad Drummond and his book-laws were out. His own law of the Border was all that was left. The plan of justice that had sent him riding into Sage City was the only plan left. A show-down with Brant Hawkins, man to man, winner take all.

Silently the Kid guided his horse deeper into the blackness, away from the gathering crowd. Circling wide, he cautiously worked his mount back toward the single street of Sage City, at a point where the scatter of lights told him the rear of the Roundup Saloon must be.

DISMOUNTING and removing his spurs, he approached the rear of the Roundup afoot. The babble of loud voices from within told him the posse that had dashed through the street, minutes before, had halted here.

Crouching low, he started to work his way along the saloon wall toward the street. Suddenly, he stopped short and dropped flat to the ground. Voices came from an open window just above his head. Now their sound halted him. A name had been spoken. The name of Brant Hawkins. The Kid listened.

"Yuh loco fools," a deep voice was blasting angrily. "Yuh played right into their hands, every man o' yuh hittin' that posse trail. Jed Crowley's the one yuh should 've finished off. A swell mess things 're in now, with Jed safe in the Smoke River jail and Judge Mann in town."

"But, Mr. Hawkins," a deep voice spoke up. "Yuh tol' us tuh git young Powell first. He had—"

Beneath the open window the Kid's body lifted, tense. Brant Hawkins was in the room beyond that window. Now, in his snarling voice, he was recounting the events that had taken place in town since the posse had ridden out hot on the Kid's trail. Unconsciously, the Kid listened as he toyed with a plan of attack.

"There's only one way out," Haw-

kins was saying. "That's this city lawyer they're bringin' in from Cheyenne to defend Jed Crowley. If that lawyer never gits tuh Smoke River, Jedge Mann can't hold that injunction hearing, an' Jed will be brought back yere fer trial. Now listen tuh this."

With mention of Jed Crowley's name, the Kid had snapped to full attention. Now he listened to Brant Hawkins lay his plans for preventing the attorney from Cheyenne ever reaching Smoke River. A queer coldness crept over the Kid as he listened to Hawkins' own admission of what would happen if the Cheyenne attorney ever reached court to present his case.

DAD DRUMMOND had known what he was talking about. From Hawkins' own words, the granting of a court injunction against him meant his hold on the range was broken forever. From then on, the independent cattlemen would control the waterholes. Hawkins' holdings would be worthless.

The Kid managed to raise himself slowly up until he could peer over the window ledge. Hawkins was still going on with his plan. There were three men in the private card room to the rear of the saloon, into which the window faced. Hawkins was addressing a loose-framed giant of a man across the table from him. The third man wore the emblem of a sheriff on his coat.

"Luggy, you take keer o' things," Hawkins ground out. "That attorney 'll take the noon stage out o' Colt Junction. Be there tuh meet 'im. Git a half dozen o' the boys and don't take no chances. Yuh won't have no trouble recognizing him. His name's Waller. Frank Waller. He'll prob'ly be carryin' a briefcase and break his neck tuh identify himself if you call 'im by name. If yuh miss out, we're all done fer."

Standing crouched against the window, the Kid strained his ears for every word. Now suddenly, he dropped flat to the ground. A running man passed not a dozen feet from where he lay, hurrying toward the rear of the Roundup.

The Kid heard the back door of the Roundup slam. In a moment, someone, puffing loudly, entered the room where Hawkins and his two men were conniving.

"Got news fer yuh, Mr. Hawkins," the puffing one announced as Hawkins' growling voice suddenly went quiet. "I jest came from down at Dad Drummond's place. Somebody stuck a knife in Dad's back. They were jest cartin' 'im over to Doc Hilton's place. Doc shook his head when they brought 'em in."

Someone emitted a low chuckle.

"Well, 'pears like luck is turnin', Mr. Brandt," a voice announced.

"But that ain't all of it," the puffing one hurried on. "They jest found Lopez right off the street 'longside o' Dad's, deader than a hunk o' horn. I figgered the Mex went back tuh even up things fer Spot after you rode the daylights outta him fer messin' things, an' Dad drilled 'im in the mix-up.

"Old man Finky says he was in his harness shop, though, an' saw some tall, lanky hand do the gunplay part after he'd heerd Dad start tuh moan. I was a-thinkin', maybe Hip's brother—"

A CHAIR crashed backward in the room beyond. A blast of oaths drowned the puffing informer's words.

"Git your men out, Sheriff," Brant Hawkins was bellowing. "Scatter 'em and let 'em comb the town. I'm takin' no excuses. It's Hip's brother, all right. Bring 'im in an' bring 'im in feet first. That—that fool is too dangerous loose."

Outside, the Kid was already hur-

rying back toward the inky shadows where he had left his mount. That nervous tremble in Brant Hawkins' voice had forced his decision. With the admissions he had overheard Hawkins make, he knew now that, after all, Dad Drummond's book-law way was the best.

A man only sprawled and kicked a few times with gun-law. Book-law worked a bit to a person's liking when he knew fear was lending a hand.

The Kid swung to the back of his stallion. His plan was made. Colt Junction was a dawn-ride ahead.

CHAPTER III

The Committee from Hell

THE train from Cheyenne passed through Colt Junction shortly after noon. By noon, the Kid had obtained some rest, bedded down his mount at a nearby stable, and was waiting at the loading chutes on the edge of town.

The train would slow here, he knew, and he intended boarding it before it reached the Junction. Hawkins' men were already in town. They would be waiting at the station.

Waiting at the switch block alongside the loading chutes, the Kid played in luck. Because of a cattle train, the Cheyenne train came to a full stop. The Kid was aboard in an instant and making his way through the coaches. Through the conductor, he had little trouble in locating Lawyer Waller.

The Cheyenne attorney was just gathering his luggage together as the Kid approached him. He was a middle-aged man, of medium build but with an anvil jaw that bespoke determination. At the moment he was in the act of slipping into a long linen duster to protect his clothing from the stage ride to Sage City.

"Pardon me, Mr. Waller," the Kid broke in abruptly. "I'm from Sage City. Dad Drummond sent me. We'll have tuh talk fast an' yuh-all 'll have tuh take my word fer everything. I'm gittin' off in yore stead at the station."

The Cheyenne lawyer looked puzzled. Quickly, the Kid explained.

"Put what papers yuh want in yore grip," he concluded, "then let me have yore straw hat an' duster an' that briefcase. Yuh-all hike on over tuh the Liberty Stables soon as yuh light. I've arranged there fer a team tuh take yuh on into Smoke River without stoppin' at Sage City. Reckon yuh'll understand better once yuh-all git there."

The Cheyenne lawyer hesitated only a moment.

"Mr. Drummond wrote me I might expect some trouble," he finally spoke. "However, I didn't expect it here. But I'll do as you say. I'll see you in court at Smoke River, Mr. Powell."

"That's my hope," the Kid answered, grinning. "Reckon if yuh git off the tail end o' the train, I'll be able tuh hold the show up this end till you sorta mix with the crowd."

THE train had already halted at the station platform. Attorney Waller, carrying the Kid's battered Stetson, hurried through the cars. The Kid, slipping into the white linen duster that covered him from shoulders to ankles, picked up the identifying briefcase and moved toward the car exit.

As he stepped onto the station platform, he recognized the man Luggy waiting a few steps back. Two men stood alongside of him.

Holding his head low beneath the borrowed straw hat of Attorney Waller, the Kid started across the platform. He carried his briefcase in

his left hand. His right hand ran through the slit-pocket of the duster to his hip.

He was almost to the street when a hand touched his shoulder. The Kid halted. As he did so, the two men trailing Luggy formed a circle around him.

"Yuh the lawyer named Waller what's headed fer Sage City?" the man Luggy demanded with a deepening scowl.

"Reckon I might be," the Kid drawled slowly, his right hand moving unseen beneath the linen duster. "Why?"

"YUH'RE changin' yore mind about goin' to Sage City, is all, mister," Luggy ground out. "That train pulls out o' here in a couple o' minutes. Kinda expect, fer yore health, yuh better be on it. Savvy that, *hombre?*"

Luggy made a threatening gesture with his gun hand. The two other men crowded in. With a quick step back, the Kid poked out with his right. It was a second before Luggy saw the .45 muzzle poked into his middle. By that time the Kid had the amazed trio before him covered.

"Reckon yuh all savvy this language, too," the Kid drawled as Luggy's eyes popped open. "I lit yere expectin' trouble. Now I craves it. Start movin', gun-hands. I'm ridin' point from here on. Turn 'round."

The snarl in the Kid's voice cut. Luggy and his men turned about. Quickly, the Kid jerked their guns clear from their holsters and dropped them in a refuse can alongside. His action was covered by the momentary excitement on the junction platform as the train made ready to pull out.

"Yuh gents is in fer a mite o' travel," the Kid apologized as he tossed the last gun into the refuse can. "Right lively, now. Climb aboard that train. Fast, yuh dung-snakes. This trigger finger o' mine is kinda achin' to clamp down."

Quickly, he herded the three muttering men across the junction platform. As quickly, he herded them aboard the already moving train.

"An' the first one o' yuh tries to light, lights fer keeps," the Kid shouted as the wide-eyed conductor, sighting the gun muzzle poking past the duster edge, leaped aboard and hurried to slam shut the car door.

The train was gathering speed. The Kid started at a trot alongside it to make sure none of the trio went out the opposite side of the car. A bare few steps and a hand grabbed him from behind. Another steadied his elbow. The muzzle of a gun pressed in his back.

"Jest a minute, law-hand," a cool voice called. "Reckon yuh're sorta missin' that train."

The Kid glanced over his shoulder. A half dozen set-faced men were crowding in on him. The gun in his back pressed hard. Someone grabbed the briefcase and stared an instant at the embossed name stamped into the leather.

"It's him," the staring one announced soberly. "C'mon, Mr. Waller. Case you don't know it, yuh're headed for Snake River."

THE Kid had been ushered out of the Junction station and into a waiting buckboard before it dawned on him just who his armed escort might be. A stern-faced man climbed in beside him. The rest of the party mounted on their hitched horses nearby.

"Sorry tuh have tuh sorta take charge this way, Mr. Waller," the man beside the Kid spoke, "but we've had law-hands talk tuh Hawkins' men before an' then change their mind about who hired them. We're takin' no chances."

The Kid struggled to control a laugh as he realized his escort was

made up of independent ranchers, concerned with Jed Crowley's case in the Smoke River court. The buckboard had already started down the street before he decided to make himself known.

"Wait a minute, stranger," he called out to the driver beside him. "Reckon 'fore things get too much of a mess, we better talk. Jim Powell's my name. I'm not any lawyer. I'm Hip Powell's brother. I came yere fer the same reason yuh-all 're here. I heard Brant Hawkins plan a little reception committee fer this yere Cheyenne lawyer, so I played lawyer."

"Yeah," the stern-faced driver agreed soberly. "An' I suppose after yuh talked tuh Luggy an' the rest o' Hawkins' men, yuh was gittin' on that train jest to keep 'em company?"

They had proceeded by this time down the street almost to the stable where the Kid had left his horse. A milling crowd about the entrance suddenly sobered the Kid.

"WAIT. Pull up yere," he commanded. "What I jest tol' yuh is the truth. Yore Cheyenne lawyer should be here at this stable, ready tuh take out a rig I hired fer 'im. Looks like somethin's happened."

The man beside the Kid gave one inquiring squint at his face, then jerked the team to a halt. At sight of the Kid, the stable owner came running over.

"Hey," he shouted as he ran, "what kind o' mess did yuh git me intuh? That feller yuh hired the rig and driver fer showed up alright, but he no sooner loaded out o' here than a coupla gun-hands takes 'im over and slugs my driver. I'm out a right good team there, feller, an' yuh're responsible 'til I git 'em back."

Beneath his leathery tan the Kid paled. Evidently, Luggy and his men at the station had not been the only ones on the lookout for Lawyer Waller. The Kid had allowed Waller to walk into a like trap at the stable.

For the next few minutes, he talked fast. The admission of the stable owner that the Kid's stallion was liveried there, finally convinced the escort from the station.

"We'll have tuh outride 'em," the Kid instructed, as his stallion was brought out. "Spread out, you fellers. If yuh sight 'em, signal with a shot."

With a consenting nod from the man seated in the buckboard, the Kid's escort of a minute before went racing down the street. But the man in the buckboard himself remained. Slipping the harness from one of the team, he mounted bareback.

"I'll be ridin' with yuh, mister," he announced. "Bein' as you and I are sorta responsible fer things, we'd best team up."

The Kid only grinned and nodded. The stern face of the old veteran was more expressive than his words.

Together, they hit for the edge of town. For a time the rig tracks were easy to follow, but after an hour or so of riding they suddenly disappeared from the main trail to swing out across country.

The main party of ranchmen had scattered and were riding blindly across the rolling stretches. The Kid and the stern-faced independent could do no more. Separating, they started moving in the general direction of Smoke River. There was not the slightest hope of finding a track in this stubby, dry grass.

IT was a good three hours later when a distant shot announced a discovery of some sort. The Kid raced his stallion in the direction from which the sound came. Minutes of riding and he burst upon a little group gathered atop a deep coulée rim.

"They're 'bout three miles ahead

of us," the stern-faced independent announced soberly. "Caught sight of 'em jest as they pulled out o' the bottom. Somethin' funny 'bout it, though. They sort o' split up an' half of 'em headed fer the hills whilst the rest hit it fer Sage City."

A half hour's riding proved the old range-veteran right. Plainly the tracks showed in the coulée bottom. Also, tracks further on showed where a second band of riders had joined the escort with the rig and the imprisoned Attorney Waller.

"Hawkins must've got word somehow in Sage City," the Kid mused. "This second bunch o' riders headed from there an' then doubled back. Reckon the only thing tuh do is split up an' cover both trails. C'mon. The hill trail is tuh my likin'."

THE Kid, with the stern-faced old man and a lad called Spencer, started down the coulée. They pushed their mounts hard. Darkness was creeping into the hills when, abruptly, they broke out upon a little clearing with a lone cabin in the center.

Before the cabin stood the rig they had trailed.

There was no time to hold council. They had ridden blindly into the very yard of the cabin. At sound of the beating horse hoofs, a man appeared in the cabin door, bearing a rifle in his hand. The Kid gave him no time to swing it to his shoulder. With a dig of spurs, he tore down upon the cabin.

His six-gun blazed as the stallion raced straight at the door. The man blocking it crumpled. Hardly had his body sprawled, than the Kid was out of his saddle and through the door. A step behind him was the grizzly rider of the saddleless horse.

A shot blazed at the Kid as he pushed past the doorway. Its lead ticked his shoulder. He dropped into a crouch, his gun spurting a crimson streak. From above his shoulder a second gun blazed. The lad Spencer had rounded the house and gone into action from the side.

It was all over in a minute. With the drift to quiet, a wide-eyed figure poked its head out from beneath a bunk. The Kid let out a whoop of joy.

It was Waller, the lawyer from Cheyenne.

"YUH all right, Mr. Waller?" the Kid hurried to question. "Yuh fit tuh hike on fer Smoke River?"

"I—I believe so," the pale-faced lawyer managed to answer. "But—but I don't believe there's any use going on. We met up with this man Hawkins out on the trail. Changed horses on our rig out there. I told them I was a salesman and not a lawyer. Don't know if they believed me or not, but I do know Hawkins has no intention of showing up in Smoke River tomorrow. He's headed for his Palisade ranch, wherever that is."

"Reckon that'll suit us if he stays there," the Kid cut in. "You was the one we was worried about."

"Well, don't worry about me." Attorney Waller shook his head. "I'm useless to you unless Hawkins shows up at the trial. What he's doing is demanding that the case be postponed. His lawyer is going to claim he is injured and in bed at his ranch. They planned it all in my hearing when they weren't sure who I was."

For an instant the Kid stood silently before the Cheyenne attorney. Then, suddenly, he snapped erect.

"Yuh say they changed horses in the coulée and Hawkins rode off with the team that brought yuh from the Junction?" he demanded.

At Waller's nod, the Kid leaped toward the door.

"Yuh-all hustle Mr. Waller on into Smoke River," he shouted over his shoulder. "Git everythin' goin' and I'll see yuh later."

"Where yuh goin'?" the stern-faced independent demanded.

"Tuh Hawkins' Palisade ranch," the Kid shouted back as he leaped into his saddle. "I'm bringin' Mr. Hawkins into Smoke River fer that trial, and bringin' 'im in legal. Yuh kin bank on it."

CHAPTER IV

Legal Arrest

IT was after midnight when the Kid sighted the corrals of Brant Hawkins' Palisade ranch. Boldly, he rode straight past the corrals to the very front of the ranch-house. Out of the moonlit darkness a form loomed in the doorway.

"Who're yuh, stranger?" a threatening voice demanded.

"The law, cowhand," the Kid shot back. "Loosen yore bones there an' slide a rope acrost them two bays out in the corral. I'm takin' 'em in with me. Where's Hawkins?"

He had not needed to voice the demand. A bulky figure, backed up by a second man the Kid recognized in the lamplight from beyond as one of the trio that had been at the Roundup Bar, appeared in the doorway.

The Kid gave Brant Hawkins no chance to speak.

"Brant Hawkins," he thundered out, his voice loud enough to carry across the ranch yard, "I arrest yuh in the name of the law fer stealin' a team of bays that belongs tuh the Liberty Stables at Colt Junction. Git yore hat an' start movin'. Yuh're headed fer Jedge Mann's court in Smoke River."

In the doorway, Brant Hawkins' bulky form started to swell with rage.

Brant finally exploded.

"What's the meanin' o' this?" he roared. "Do yuh know who I am? Do yuh—"

"Reckon I know too danged well who yuh are," the Kid cut in. "Yuh're the horse-thief what's responsible for them two bays bein' in that corral yonder. Git yore hat, I said. *Pronto!*"

"Wait a minute." The man behind Hawkins peered through the doorway at the Kid. "Yuh're no deppity. Yuh're the hand that was in the Roundup Saloon up at Sage City yestidday, shoutin' 'bout goin' tuh kill Brant Hawkins on sight."

"Right as rain, stranger," the Kid barked back, "an' I'm still shoutin' it. I'm just givin' this skunk his choice, is all. He kin take it legal in Jedge Mann's court, er he kin take it gun-law fashion, right now. I ain't a mite partic'lar."

Brant Hawkins had been puffing with rage. The Kid's words seemed to cool him now.

"But yuh—yuh can't arrest me," he finally stammered. "Yuh've no authority. Yuh're jest a common range-hand."

"An' yuh're jest a common, murderin' horse-thief," the Kid said flatly. "Make yore choice. Yuh're goin' tuh Smoke River sittin' up er layin' flat. Say which."

BRANT HAWKINS paled in the lamplight as he blinked at the waiting Kid. His lips seemed to mutter something. In the moonlight, the Kid's hands flashed down. A crimson streak spouted from the muzzle of his one gun. The man at Hawkins' back dropped with his unholstered weapon dangling from his fingers.

The Kid half whirled to face the half dozen men coming toward him at a run from the corrals.

"This is the law, yuh cowhands yonder," the Kid shouted. "Any o' yuh hankerin' to hit the Hoot-Owl trail, speak up. I'll belly-lead anyone o' yuh tries tuh stop me arrestin' this horse-thief. The law's givin' or-

ders yere. Trot out them two stolen bays."

A minute of low muttering and the squeak of a corral gate told the Kid he had won. He still stood with his back to the ranchhouse, his one gun in Brant Hawkins' middle.

"A word out o' yuh, Hawkins, an' I relieves my trigger finger o' this cramp," he hissed in warning. "Mount up out there, an' see we travel out o' yere alone."

With the boldness of a law-hand backed by a dozen deputies, the Kid watched Hawkins swing into the saddle of a horse led out to him. With the same boldness he turned his back upon the scattering of Hawkins' hired hands, and herded his prisoner past the corral gates.

Brant Hawkins rode in silence. The Kid rode chuckling to himself. Behind them trailed the stolen team of bays.

IT was morning when the Kid rode with his prisoner through the main street of Smoke River. Everywhere eyes turned to stare at him. Brant Hawkins, slumped low in his saddle and leading a team of bays, was attraction enough for any town resident; but the grinning young hand, wearing a dude straw hat atop his head and packing a brace of six-guns at his hip, started a buzz of speculation.

Suddenly, as they approached the court house, the Kid recognized a shouting, grizzled-faced man racing after him afoot. It was the old rancher who had ridden with him out of Colt Junction.

"Didn't believe my eyes, son," he called out as he reached the Kid. "Hustle in there. Hawkins' attorney has jest about got the judge convinced yore friend yonder is down in bed with the lead-pip."

The Kid did hustle. His snarl silenced the attempt of Brant Hawkins to protest.

"Leadin' yuh down would be a privilege tuh me, skunk," he rasped in Hawkins' face. "Start makin' tracks 'fore I change my mind about this legal business."

Hawkins obeyed. With sight of the crowded court room, he seemed to gather courage to resist. Once past the court doors, he attempted to race toward the bench where his attorney was at the moment making a plea of postponement before Judge Mann.

A quick kick of the Kid's lanky legs and Hawkins went sprawling flat. On the bench, Judge Mann began pounding for order.

"WHAT'S the meaning of this intrusion?" he bellowed angrily.

"If it please th' court," the Kid spoke out, straddling over the still sprawled Hawkins, "as a law abidin' citizen I wish tuh turn this horse-thief over to this court fer arrest an'—"

Hawkins' attorney, suddenly recognizing his client, leaped to action.

"Your Honor," he shouted. "This is an insult to the court. This man being brought in is my client. He is Mr. Hawkins of—"

"He's still a horse-thief, yore Honor," the Kid cut in. "I brought th' evidence with me. Reckon there's plenty yere kin call the brand on those two bays hitched outside. I tracked 'em tuh this man's ranch where I made th' arrest."

"Your Honor," Hawkins' attorney shouted again. "This man has no power of arrest. No authority. I demand his arrest for abduction of my client from a sick-bed and—"

Judge Mann's gavel again pounded for order.

"For your information, Mr. Tuttle," he finally addressed the irate lawyer, "I refer you to that section of the law which gives any private citizen the right of arrest where the citizen is a witness to a felony being committed. I think in this case, posses-

sion of a team of stolen horses, tracked from the scene of the crime to the point of possession, would be construed a felony. The sheriff will take charge of the prisoner.

"Meanwhile, Mr. Tuttle, being as your client is now in court, we will overrule your motion for postponement of the case of Hip Powell and Jed Crowley *versus* Brant Hawkins. Attorney for the plantiff will kindly state his case."

IT was long after sundown when the Gun-Shy Kid managed to work his way to the outer edge of the crowded barroom in Smoke River. At the bar Jed Crowley was the center of congratulations that had poured in from all over the basin. The toast just drunk had been to the good news just received by messenger from Sage City, that Dad Drummond was sure of recovery.

Too many toasts had already been downed to the granting of the injunction against Brant Hawkins and the self-defense verdict netted out to Jed. The laughing, shouting crowd of independents were out to bestow new laurels. Suddenly, someone sighted the Kid attempting to make his exit.

"Hey, grab 'im," went up the shout. "Reckon we been shoutin' glory yere to everone but the real *hombre* that had toted the key to justice."

The Kid was dragged back to the bar. A flushed-faced Attorney Waller struggled to assume dignity.

"Gentlemen," he boomed with legal pomp, "to the man who knew more law than all of us. The man who arrested Brant Hawkins, by authority of his citizenry rights. The man who—"

Lawyer Waller suddenly forgot the purpose of his dignity. He dropped his poise. His arm reached out to circle the Kid's shoulder.

"SAY, son," he inquired seriously. "How'd you happen to know about that legal trick? Brant Hawkins is going to jail for horse stealing, sure as I'm white and over twenty. Did you ever study law?"

"Gosh, no," the Gun-Shy Kid exploded. He grinned. "But I been arrested myself fer horse stealin'. Reckon law teaches, no matter which side o' the gate yuh're swingin' on."

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The Comeback

With a muttered curse, Butch ran to the terrified horse

Butch Smith, Drifting Grub-Liner, Bucks the Crowfoot Outfit in this Bang-Up Western Yarn

By DABNEY OTIS COLLINS

Author of "Two-Gun Trouble," "Bob-Wise Bobcat," etc.

THE grub liner known as "Butch," seated in the doorway of the Y-Bench bunk house, glanced up swiftly from the hackamore he was mending. A horse was racing down the valley toward the ranchhouse, careening, kicking, plunging and snorting. Dangling from a stirrup of the empty saddle, bouncing and bobbing crazily against the rocky ground, was what appeared to be a bundle of ragged clothing. With a muttered curse Butch sprang up and ran to-

ward the terrified horse, heading him into the corral.

At the same moment "Ramrod" Smith, owner of the Y-Bench, came hobbling rapidly from the ranch-house on crutches, his rugged, grizzled, square-hewn face fixed with horror.

Quickly Butch extricated the foot of the battered rider from the stirrup through which it had slipped, in silence bore him into the house and laid him on the bed. Plainly the rider was dying.

"Water—quick," muttered Ramrod Smith, and forced a few drops of whisky between the blue, set lips.

BUTCH began bathing the bruised and gashed forehead. "Look," he whispered, and pointed to the heel-less boot which had slipped through the stirrup. "That heel was pried off. See the knife marks?"

Ramrod Smith peered closely at the flat impression above where the heel had been, and nodded grimly. He bent low over the mutilated cowboy. "Who done it, Art?" And when no answer came he forced down the rider's throat a few more drops of liquor, and repeated his question.

Art Kendall's eyelids fluttered into a wide-opened stare. "Hit me from behind," he said distinctly. "Shoved my foot—through the stirrup."

"Who, Art? Who done it?"

"'Smiler' Dawson—Elder Springs," the cowboy said, and he closed his eyes and trailed out, across the Divide.

For fully a minute old Smith stood looking down at what had been his most trusted rider; then he hobbled into the adjoining room and sank heavily into a buckskin-bottomed chair. The grub liner called Butch followed.

The hard-bitten cowman fixed his steely slits of eyes on the tall, slim-waisted, broad-shouldered young man who stood before him. No flicker of recognition flashed from his eyes; indeed, they seemed to grow even more steely, and the mouth to become more like a seam in a slab of granite. Neither did Butch's face, strongly resembling the old man's now that it wore the same stern expression, show any sign of recognition. At last Ramrod Smith spoke gruffly.

"What do ye want?"

Butch colored slightly, even beneath his tan; and when he spoke it was with evident effort. "I heard the Crowfoot was givin' you trouble, Dad. Thought maybe I could help you."

"I don't need yore help," Ramrod Smith said shortly.

Butch hesitated a moment, as though there was something else he had to say. Then he turned on his heel, and without another look, left the room. His face was sober as he strode toward the pasture to get his horse, but it was not long until a broad grin curved his lips.

"Helluva fatted calf this prodigal son got," he told himself. "Well, I never figgered the old man would act any different. I had it comin'."

BITTERLY he recalled the youthful misdeed which had alienated him from his father and sent him roaming over cattleland, from one ranch to another, for five long years. He had driven a herd of Y-Bench steers into Cheyenne and sold them. The proceeds of the sale, two thousand dollars, he had lost at faro.

Ramrod Smith, hearing of the act, sent word to him never to return home. So Butch had become an outcast, a drifter. One idea only dominated him during all the lonely years, and that was to accumulate enough money to repay his debt. He was yet a long way from the realization of this ambition.

"So, he don't need my help,"

Butch mused. "Well, he's goin' to get it, anyhow. If half of what I been hearin' in the bunk house the last coupla days is true, he needs plenty help. Smiler Dawson an' his Crowfoot coyotes done stole him blind, rubbed out four o' his best men, an' woulda downed him if he hadn't been so all-fired tough.

"Why, he ain't paid his hands in six month. I'll just amble up to Elder Springs, an' see what it was Art Kendall was tryin' to tell us."

AS Butch rode up the wide, green valley which formed the Y-Bench home range, it was easy for him to comprehend why Smiler Dawson, owner of the notorious Crowfoot outfit, had forced a range war on the Y-Bench.

Indian Meadows, as the valley was called, was fifteen miles long and varied in width from three to six miles. It was walled in, without a break, by straight-sided limestone cliffs.

Down the middle of the valley wound a tinkling, silvery stream which was fed by a number of mountain springs, chief of which was Elder Springs.

On each side of the stream waved hundreds of acres of slough grass and blue-joint, waist-high, thick, and succulent. The remainder of the valley floor was also deep in grass, though dried and brown from the summer's drouth. Three or four haystacks arose out of the green sea, like stranded barks. No cattle were in the valley; it was reserved for winter range.

Indian Meadows was the one oasis in that section of Wyoming, even during protracted drouths it retained its fresh green. Smiler Dawson, whose boast was that he would one day become the biggest cattleman in the state, had long coveted this valley. Now that old Ramrod Smith was facing bankruptcy, it seemed only a matter of a short time until the ever-spreading Crowfoot brand would clutch this strip of Eden in its rapacious claw.

Turning these things over in his mind, Butch rode at a stiff gallop up the valley. Had Art Kendall, or any of the Y-Bench riders, for that matter, been there to warn him, he would not have ridden so close to the valley rim. Thus he might have avoided the ambusher's bullet which passed through the crown of his hat, missing his brain by less than three inches.

At once he drew rein, jerked his rifle from its scabbard and pivoted in the saddle. Above a bench near the rim of the limestone wall floated a small white puff of smoke; then came the muffled report.

"That's one o' them dry gulchin' Crowfoot sons now," said Butch, and he whipped his rifle to his shoulder.

DOWN from the heights winged another death messenger. It fanned the cowboy's cheek as it crashed into his rifle stock, all but tearing it from his hands.

Realizing that he was but a target for the invisible bushwhacker, he slid loosely from the saddle and sprawled face-down on the ground. Motionless he lay, the rifle clutched in his hand, eyes slanted up at the bench over which floated a cottony puff of smoke.

Each instant he expected to feel a red-hot slug tearing into his body, or to head the footsteps of the assassin coming down the mountain.

Fifteen minutes, perhaps, he lay as dead. Deciding, then, that his ruse had been successful, he sprang to his feet and ran swiftly toward the base of the cliff. He climbed to the bench from which the ambusher had fired; but all he found were two rifle shells, which he put in his pocket. He ascended to the jagged spires of the ridge.

A man on a buckskin horse was galloping away from the mountains. Butch jammed his Winchester to his shoulder and squinted down the shiny barrel. But he did not shoot.

"Too far away," he decided. "Besides, I ain't sure he's the right man."

AT the head of the valley where it narrowed, funnel-like, and climbed upward among the rocks to form the only pass into or out of the valley, he halted and looked back. A peaceful scene, this wide stretch of emerald with its ribbon of silver and its high white walls. Clustered at its lower end were the ranch-house, corrals and barns.

Below that were what were known as the "breaks," an almost inaccessible strip of bad lands cut up by a maze of arroyos and small canyons.

He faced back into the pass. Before him marched a choppy sea of rock, studded with dark-green pines and junipers. These rocks rolled back from the north rim of the valley, then pitched their forested slopes sharply to the saw-toothed, snow-capped peaks of the back range.

He spurred his horse into the pass whose rocky floor countless thousands of hoofs had failed to smooth. After a tortuous ascent of a quarter mile he emerged into a wide, shallow coulee which, in turn, opened onto a thickly forested table at the back of which, in a grove of lacy elders, was Elder Springs.

In spite of Art Kendall's vague, though ominous, warning, Butch was not prepared for what he saw. The deep granite basin of the spring was choked with large boulders and tons of dirt, and its walls had been caved in. Only a thread of water trickled from beneath the debris.

"Plugged up!" the ranny muttered, and swore. "Now, the crick'll run dry."

He was aware that a Y-Bench man guarded the spring, and he halloed. When no answer came, he pushed through the elder bushes toward a pile of logs which lay at the foot of a rock face. From the heap of logs, which had been a lean-to shack built against the rock, projected a man's boot.

"Got him, too," Butch said softly. "Looks like Smiler's callin' for a showdown."

He rolled the logs away. The guard had been shot in the head. He had not been dead more than an hour, because his body was still warm. It occurred to Butch, with a sharp pang of remorse, that had he not wasted precious time in climbing after the man who had attempted to bushwhack him, he would have reached the spring probably in time to have saved the man's life.

HE was preparing to lift the body on his horse when he noticed a small piece of brown paper beneath the dead man's hand, on which was writing. It was a wheat straw cigarette paper, and on it was scrawled, almost illegibly, as though it had been pressed against a rock, the one word, "Tonight."

"Tonight!" Butch repeated. "Then, Smiler an' his Crowfoot hellions ain't finished yet."

His first impulse was to ride back to the Y-Bench and get a war party together. Immediately he gave up this plan. In the first place, there were no cowboys at the ranch; all of them were out riding the Soda Creek range.

They would not be in until late tonight, possibly after midnight. In the second place—and Butch's eyes became as steely as old Ramrod Smith's—what better opportunity of proving to his dad that he was more than a drifter?

He covered the guard's body with logs so that there was no danger of

prowling animals getting at it. A short distance from the spring he came upon the tracks of two ridden horses.

They led toward Crowfoot range, and he was certain he was on the trail of the murderers.

TEN miles, or more, of sage-covered ridge and valley, alternately ascending and descending like ridges and grooves of a giant washboard, lay behind before he came in sight of the two riders. He was mounting the crest of a knoll and he saw the men, like animated toys at that distance, draw up in the bottom of a shallow arroyo.

Then, before his eyes they disappeared.

Butch nodded grimly. "They seen me, too," he decided. "Figgerin' on puttin' a bullet in me when I ride into that arroyo."

He came steadily on, as though he suspected nothing. When he reached the low ridge from whose opposite slope dipped the arroyo, he hitched his horse in a clump of junipers and bellied to the crest of the ridge. Stretched behind a flat rock, rifle at shoulder, he searched the arroyo bottom.

It was not his purpose to shoot without warning, much as these buzzards deserved it. He would give them a fighting chance, slim though it might be.

"See somethin' down there?"

A spear of ice rippled up Butch's spine. He spun round, to see the muzzle of a six-gun pointed at the middle of his forehead. Behind the gun was a broad red face whose hard, glittering eyes made a mockery of the smile which curved the thin lips.

The man was bull-necked and thick-shouldered, and the backs of his wide, fat hands were curled with coarse yellow hairs. Though he had never seen the owner of the Crowfoot brand, Butch knew this must be Smiler Dawson. "Yeh, I thought I saw a coupla polecats down there," he answered slowly.

For a long minute Dawson looked at him, and Butch had the feeling that he was being studied intently. Dawson smiled, but not for an instant did he relax his aim. "It might be kinda unhealthy, shootin' polecats on this range," he said.

Butch laid down his rifle and stood up. He had already decided on his course of action. "Looka here, fella," he said hotly, "I always heard tell the Crowfoot was a good outfit to work for. But I musta been mistook. It's sure a helluva outfit, when a man comin' to look for a job ain't safe from bein' dry gulched."

Dawson's smile never left his lips. "Lookin' for a job, are you?"

"I was," corrected Butch. "Ain't so sure 'bout it now."

Smiler Dawson whistled shrilly, and was answered from below. Immediately the two men emerged from their hiding places. "Got him?" one called.

"JUST listen at that," scoffed Butch. "Talkin' like I was a wolf or somethin'. What kinda outfit is this, anyhow?"

Smiler did not answer, but indicated with his gun barrel that Butch should precede him down the slope.

Butch's lips tightened when he saw Smiler lead his horse from behind an outcropping. It was a buckskin, the same horse that he had seen being ridden away from the cliffs after he had been shot at. Smiler Dawson it was, then, who had tried to murder him, after having already done poor Art Kendall to death.

Butch experienced a queer crawling of the hairs at the back of his neck as he led his horse from the

juniper thicket. Would Smiler recognize the horse—a stocking-footed, blazed-faced sorrel? If the Crowfoot man did recognize the sorrel, Butch could read no indication of it on his bland, smiling face.

THE two men rode up out of the arroyo. One was lanky, raw-boned, hawk-shouldered, with a ghastly scar extending from the corner of his mouth to his left ear. The other was big-boned and heavy-set like Smiler, and he had the same cold, expressionless eyes. Butch took this man to be Smiler's younger brother Gabe.

"Who you got there?" inquired Gabe Dawson, riding close and looking keenly into Butch's face.

"Says he's lookin' for a job," Smiler explained.

"Was," Butch bluffed. "I ain't so sure 'bout it now. Ain't used to ridin' with a bunch o' bushwhackers."

The scar-faced man's lips lifted in a silent snarl, like a vicious dog, and he nervously fingered his gun butt. Gabe Dawson growled, "If you don't like Crowfoot range, you can get the hell off it."

"Pronto," snarled "Scarface."

"An' let you two buzzards put a bullet in my back," said Butch.

"Who you been ridin' for?" Smiler Dawson smiled his pleasantest.

"Nobody for quite a spell," Butch answered indifferently. "Last coupla days I been ridin' the grub line over at old Ramrod Smith's Y-Bench. I got 'shamed o' eatin' off him. He's broke; ain't paid his hands in five-six month. So I left there an' figgered maybe I could get a job ridin' for the Crowfoot."

He had played his hand boldly because, on second thought, he felt certain Smiler Dawson had recognized his horse. He had no fear that Smiler would know him, since they had never met before; but he did not want to be thought a Y-Bench rider.

He watched the faces of the three men. Plainly, Gabe and the scar-faced man were itching to go for their guns. But the elder Dawson's gambler's eyes and smiling lips told him nothing.

"What about it?" demanded Gabe, looking significantly at his brother.

Smiler beamed. "Why, I reckon we can find a place for him, Gabe."

Gabe stared incredulously. "Since when has the Crowfoot gone to hirin' Y-Bench grub liners?" he demanded.

"Mebbe he's a spy," Scarface suggested darkly.

Smiler straightened in the saddle. "Drag it, Scarface. We're makin' a pasear over to the Chicken Crick herd. Come on, fella."

Lying on his back in a Crowfoot bunk house six hours later, Butch took stock of his situation. He had no cause for elation. The ride to Chicken Creek had availed him nothing. The surly, suspicious Scarface would not talk and the Dawson brothers had ridden together, conversing quietly between themselves.

WHILE the three men busied themselves cutting out and disinfecting calves whose brand marks had broken open and become infested with screw worms, Butch had been sent to Arroyo, a few miles distant from there, to purchase dynamite—for blasting post holes, Smiler had explained.

As he lay in the bunk, thinking, he began to wonder if there could be a connection between the dynamite and the dying warning of the guard at Elder Springs.

Certainly there was a vague sense of unrest in the bunk house, a haunting impression of foreboding. He could feel it in the subdued voices of the cowboys at their poker games, and in the quiet, sober manner in which they cleaned and oiled their six-shooters. Once, when Scarface

looked at him, he was certain that he detected on the evil face a hideous, mocking laugh.

"'Spose Smiler suspects me, after all?" thought he. "An' instead o' bein' a Crowfoot rider, I'm a Crowfoot prisoner?"

HE was not long left in doubt as to his status on the Crowfoot. About half past two that morning he and seven Crowfoot riders, including Smiler, Gabe and Scarface, who packed the dynamite, drew rein in the pass at the head of Indian Meadows.

Scarcely a word had been spoken during the long ride, and now in silence the men dismounted and ground-hitched their tired horses. Up to Butch strode Smiler Dawson, his broad, beaming face pontifical in the starlight.

Close behind Smiler was Gabe. Panther-quick, Butch's gun leaped into his hand. In the same moment a small, hard object bored against his spine and Scarface's harsh voice snarled in his ear:

"Drop it!"

Butch held his aim on Smiler's heart, but he saw from the corner of his eye the circle of steel which surrounded him. "I got you, Smiler," he said steadily. "Call off your coyotes or I'll—"

An ear-splitting crash, a spurt of flame and Butch's hand suddenly went numb. His gun had been shot out of his hand. He turned upon the man who had made the shot, leaped at him with bare fists. Instantly his arms were caught from behind and pinioned. To struggle was useless—seven against one. "What's the idea here?" Butch demanded angrily.

"Jest take it easy," purred Smiler, and Butch felt that he was laughing. "All right, Gabe. Fix Smith so he won't do any more driftin'."

Smith! Then Smiler knew him, had known him from the first—it must be, he resembled his dad more than he thought he did. But why bring him here? And what were the hellions up to—tonight! A hundred conflicting thoughts whirled dizzily through Butch's brain as he was being tied, hand and foot. He was thrown roughly to the ground.

"Come on, boys!" ordered Smiler, and he led the way down the pass into the valley, the hoofs of the horses sounding on the stones like muffled rifle shots.

"What devilish scheme has Smiler got in his brain?" Butch asked himself over and over. "That guard at Elder Springs knowed about it. Maybe Art Kendall, too. An' I got to find out!"

LIKE a man suddenly bereft of reason, he fought his ropes. He writhed, twisted, wrenched. He pulled, heaved, strained until the manila cord buried itself in his wrists.

Desperately he tried to move his pinioned arms back and forth against jagged-edged rocks. He struggled until his face became swollen and purple and the breath whistled through his constricted throat in a gasping wheeze.

At length he lay back, utterly exhausted, his wrists bleeding, his dripping-wet shirt ripped to ribbons—and the rope was as tight as ever.

As he lay there, listening to his violently pumping heart, he became conscious of a man moving toward him. Above him bent the evil visage of the man called Scarface.

"So you thought you'd spy on the Crowfoot, did you?" Scarface sneered.

Butch said nothing, and the man continued, his sullen voice tinged with evident satisfaction. "Well, yore spyin' days are 'bout over, you sneakin' coyote. When that charge o' dynamite goes off up there, there won't be enough left o' you to wad a scatter-gun. Any time a Y-Bench

Laughing, Scarface rode down the pass to join his companions.

In a blinding flash Smiler Dawson's plot burst in Butch's brain. They were going to blow up the pass, thus closing Indian Meadows. With the pass destroyed, there would be no way of cattle moving into or out of the valley. It was a master stroke, which would utterly crush Ramrod Smith.

In almost the same instant he realized why Smiler had spared his life in the arroyo, why he had been sent to purchase dynamite—

"The whole thing's clear as day now," he told himself, and involuntarily tugged at his bonds. "Smiler don't want folks thinkin' he blowed up the pass—that'd be pretty raw, even for him, and the sheriff might take a notion to sit in on the game. So he's going to make it look like I done it. He knows I'm on the outs with dad an' that folks'll say I was just gettin' even. An' all the time Smiler will be gettin' double revenge."

He paused, struck cold by a sudden, paralyzing thought.

"They don't figger on leavin' me roped," he whispered. "That's why Scarface said he'd see me later. They're goin' to knock me on the head, light the fuse an' leave me for the rocks to fall on. When they find what's left o' me, that'll sure clear the Crowfoot o' the dynamitin'."

But what were the Crowfoot men doing now, down there in the valley? What final touch was being added to their hellish plans to wipe the Y-Bench brand from the face of the earth? Butch turned over on his side, staring into the darkness.

He strained his ears into the steady breeze which blew up the valley, but all he heard was the rattling of the dried grass. Then he saw a tiny light flash.

Almost instantly it became redder and larger, and burst into flame. Simultaneously, other lights appeared, flickering like fireflies before spreading rapidly fanwise.

"They're burnin' him out!" Butch muttered hoarsely.

The sight of the fire maddened him, charged his aching muscles with a rush of manpower such as he had never before experienced. He surged against the accursed rope until it seemed that either the rope or he must break—nothing could long withstand that strain. But a master hand had tied him; the rope loosened not one fraction of an inch. Gasping, he fell back.

NOW the whole valley became a vast crimson bowl in which the swiftly moving riders appeared as black, stark silhouettes. A haystack had caught fire, belching boiling columns of smoke and forked yellow tongues into the weirdly illumined sky. Blazing brands shot from the haystack and sailed into the air.

Some fell near the foot of the pass, starting small fires. Others, swept along on stronger air currents, struck the pines on the slope of the pass, shattering into myriad sparks.

Butch thrilled, as one of these firebrands fell among the rocks below.

With a soft rustle another brand landed among the rocks scarcely twenty feet from him and slightly above where he lay. It sent up a tiny shower of sparks, then seemed to go out. Butch held his breath. Eyes hanging over his cheeks, he watched. After what seemed an eternity, a miniature tongue of flame speared the darkness.

"Now!" whispered Butch.

Like some headless thing in its death throes, he rolled, tumbled, twisted his way over sharp-edged rocks and spiney growths until he lay panting beside the tiny spark. He placed his lips almost against the dying flame, blew gently. Was he too late? The flame flickered up,

quickly fell. In feverish haste he picked up a pine needle between his lips, put it on the smoldering coals.

At last, it blazed up. Swiftly he gathered more needles, and dried leaves; then he added twigs, until the fire was crackling in earnest.

He thrust his wrists into the flames. Greedily the orange-red tongues licked at the rope, bit into his lacerated wrists with the sting of a hundred hornets.

He strained against the rope; and when it did not give, he sank his wrists into the very coals. The world about him became a black, heaving, pitching void. The pounding against his ear drums was driving him insane. Could that be his heart—or was it the returning Crowfoot men? Both. Black figures were streaking up the valley.

Butch put everything he had left into one mighty heave. The rope snapped in two, and his hands fell free. He loosened his feet.

No sooner had he staggered up, drunk from the excruciating agony of his self-inflicted torture, than a rider plunged up the narrow trail, almost on top of him. Instinctively Butch's hand flashed to his hip.

He snatched up a rock and, as he leaped aside, hurled it straight into the rider's face. Solidly the rock struck, and the man tumbled from the saddle as if shot through the brain. Butch lunged for the horse's reins, because he wanted the man's rifle; but he missed, and the horse clattered up the pass.

He jerked the rider's gun from his belt, quickly drew out a handful of cartridges. As he arose, he caught a glimpse of the man's face.

"Scarface!" he muttered. "That's another scar you'll take to hell!"

Another rider rushed upon him, closely followed by yet another. The first slumped over his horse's neck with Butch's bullet between his eyes. The other man fired point-blank at Butch's pistol flash, whirled his horse and raced back down the pass, shouting warnings. A rattle of rifle fire smothered his cries. Charging up the valley, partially shielded by clouds of low-lying smoke, were five or six riders.

"It's the Y-Bench riders!" Butch yelled.

Caught between two fires, the Crowfoot riders—only three now—spurred their frenzied mounts into the pass. "Halt!" warned Butch, crouched behind a boulder.

A SCALDING stab across his left arm answered him. That rider died. The man behind him pitched to the ground on his face. The flash of the next shot revealed the face of Smiler Dawson. Smiler's second shot struck Butch in the shoulder, slammed him back four feet.

But, even as he thumbed the hammer, Smiler Dawson was dead, with Butch's slug in his brain.

More riders charged up the trail. Butch was squeezing the trigger on the foremost man, when a deep, harsh voice bellowed his name. That was Ramrod Smith. "Over here," answered Butch and sank to the ground, clutching his shoulder.

"All right, boys!" roared Ramrod Smith. "Git back thar an' put out that fire!" He climbed painfully from the saddle and hobbled over to where Butch lay. Somehow, in the darkness, he found Butch's hand. He squeezed it, hard; and he did not release it. "Ain't bad hurt, are ye, son?" the old man asked huskily.

"Not now," grinned Butch.

"Ye wiped out the Crowfoot hoof an' hide, an' saved me," continued Ramrod Smith in tones of deep admiration. "I jest want ye to know we're squar' now, son; an' if ye'll take a-holt an' run her, the Y-Bench is yourn."

"She's ours together, Dad. Now, gimme a drink."

Killer's Tally

Durant sent a blind shot at the ghostly horseman

A Hard-Riding, Hard-Fighting Cowpuncher Faces a Necktie Party and the Menace of Flaming Lead As He Barges Up Against Ornery Dry-Gulchers

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GEORGE DURANT — "Gunsmoke" Durant—squatted on his heels before a campfire on the slope of Boothill Canyon watching his boss, old Ellis Macey, counting the money from the T-Bar sale into a buckskin pouch. Down canyon the saddle string moved restlessly, there was weather brewing in the mountains.

A sudden wind screamed through the pinnacles above, spilled over the canyon rim with ghostly moan. Durant started at the sound, his hard face tensed. Lifting his head he gazed across the gloomy draw. There

on the steep slope were the graves of Boothill, marked by rotting crosses. In one a man lay, cut down by his six-gun lead. Years ago that was—but they said the ghosts of dead men walked again. Durant wondered.

A CHIMNEY of sparks whipped upward from the yucca fire. Macey, finishing his count, leaned against the granite ledge behind him.

"Twenty hundred," he said. Gold clinked as he laid the pouch on the skirt of his white slicker-coat. "Good pay fer a bunch o' weaner calves. It'll jest about rub out thet mortgage tally. Th' Broken Arrow's done well by me, son, this year."

"Why not?" Durant replied. "Yuh done well by yore riders, Macey. A plenty that was headed fer Hell's loadin' chutes—yuh turned 'em. Me, fer one." He gazed at Macey, his black eyes somber. "Wish't I cud change some things that's past—Macey, yuh reckon *killer's* tally can be rubbed out?"

Anxiety was in Durant's tones.

"It kin." Macey nodded. "Sit yore kak straight, as y're doin' now. Gunsmoke Durant, they called yuh when yuh come to me. Th' name's outlawed a'ready. Helpin' me to pack this money, ain't yuh? Y're a trusted hand. I done the same fer other waddies. Th' Broken Arrow's got a name fer blottin' outlaw brands. My nephew, Wade, they said he wuz no 'count afore I tuk him on."

"Cards was all that hobbled Wade," Durant replied. "Different with me." He stared grimly into the fire. "I been on the gun-rustle too long. I killed a man onct, here in this very canyon— Mebbe you know'd that."

Macey tied the buckskin bag. "I know hit, son. He's buried on the slope acrost. But yuh let him take th' draw, I heerd."

"Reckon it don't matter," Durant said. "The killer tally stands. Seems like I see his face t'night; an' the wind moan starts me shiverin'. Does ghosts walk, y' reckon, Macey? Or mebbe I'm jes' turnin' soft. But tonight—"

Vivid lightning split the sky, brightening the canyon walls like day.

With the reverberating crash of thunder Durant leaped to his feet.

"A man!" he cried. "A ghost! I seen it—standing in the open grave acrost th' hill!"

THE older man stared at him pityingly. Then from the darkness came the frightened snicker of a horse. Instantly Macey jerked the weathered Stetson from his head, swept it like a flail across the fire. The scattered embers smoldered. He took a half stride toward the ledge and stopped.

"Hunt cover. Hit's an ambush, son!"

But Durant did not move. His eyes were fixed, the eyes of a man who looks at death. Macey, gripping his arm, dragged him through the bear-grass thickets into shelter. The money pouch fell clinking to the sand. He slipped the draw-string on his wrist and, reaching beneath the skirt of his white slicker, drew a Colt from the holster on his thigh.

"Thet hoss," he said, "warn't with our cavvy. An' you wuz sky-lined, son. Catch up th' broncs and push fer the canyon mouth. I'll work on down the ridge an' join yuh. Hustle! Watch fer gopher holes, th' side hill's peppered with 'em."

But Durant moved out from the ledge, peering through the dark as if he had not heard. Macey snatched his arm again.

"Back! We're dry-gulched, boy, I said!"

But Durant did not answer. Lightning flamed again—a rolling peal of

thunder burst over the Dragoons. And like a lapping echo, a rifle cracked sharp on the rims. Durant staggered and pitched headlong, blood streaming from a bullet furrow on his temple. Macey, gripping the buckskin money pouch, leaped unscathed into the brush. His white slicker moved in the bear-grass thickets, disappeared. The rifle barked again.

DURANT gave a low cry. He tried to rise, but his legs buckled, he rolled out beside the fire. The yucca stumps flamed suddenly, throwing his figure into silhouette. A third time the rifle blasted loudly from the ridge.

Durant quivered with the impact of the bullet. He fought to his hands, crawling in blind circles. He stared into the night, a half-dazed fear riding his thoughts.

Maybe a ghost had risen from the grave to square the tally—yet those rifle slugs were real.

And Macey—Durant knew he must find Macey. He crept toward the granite ledge. His right arm hung slack, a bullet in the shoulder-point. Blood from the head wound channeled down into his eyes, his brain spun and whirled. But he dragged on up the slope.

As he reached shelter rain began to fall, beating with faint rattle on the dry cactus spines. Durant propped himself against a boulder. He fumbled for his gun but could not find it.

The lightning flared again. In its momentary gleam he peered across the drywash at the canyon slope. But there was no one on it, neither man nor ghost. The thunder faded, there was only the wind's scream and the brittle tapping of the rain. The sounds grew fainter. Durant, his senses dimming out, slid down into the bear-grass thickets.

The campfire hissed and burned lower, quenched gradually by the gentle downpour. Slowly its glow died, and except when lightning blazed, the darkness of the canyon was impenetrable.

Durant roused. Macey—he must find Macey!

His left hand touched the pistol holster. He drew the weapon, got to his feet, knees buckling, and stumbled down the slope to the canyon floor. Darkness hung like a curtain, hiding the canyon walls.

Suddenly Durant gave a cry of fear. Something was moving toward him in the shadows. A horse—carrying a ghostly rider! Durant wiped away a bloody stream washed by the rain into his eyes, sank his teeth deep into his lip. His brain was playing tricks again.

BUT the horse limped on, the crouching rider almost hidden in the saddle.

Durant held the six-gun gripped in his two hands. The barrel wavered, poised; he fired.

With the pistol crash the horse reared, plunged. But the ghostly rider, with a flickering movement, raised his arm. A pistol muzzle jetted flame. Durant heard a slug scream by, felt the wind-lap brush his face. He saw the rider, gun hand still upraised. But Durant could not move. No man this—but a ghost come back to square the killer's tally.

An ember blazed in the dying fire. Again the six-gun blasted. A shudder crossed Durant, he fell suddenly on his face. He did not see the horseman turn, climb the canyon slope to the campfire and empty a bundle on the feeble blaze.

The fire leaped up in crackling bluish flame, and Durant roused. He dragged to his feet, sent a blind shot at the ghostly horseman. The rider gave a cry, swayed in the saddle and a grim smile crossed Durant's face;

but as he looked, into his eyes came bitter agony.

"Macey!" he cried. "I've shot yuh!" He stared at the figure in the rain-glistening white slicker, and fell heavily to the sand.

The storm drew off with sullen mutterings of thunder. Hours passed and a grey of false dawn lighted the east canyon rims. Durant's mind took up its function. His lips were dry and cracked; he felt giddy and knife pains stabbed his temples.

SUDDENLY a memory came and Durant cried out hoarsely. Macey—he'd shot him! No, it was a lie—or a fever dream. Then he saw a rain pool beside him, faintly crimson. The leather of his chaps was stained with blood and his shirt stiff with it.

No, not a dream.

And those rifle bullets that had cut him down, they, too, were real. Last night there had been a third man in the canyon. He must pick up the killer's trail.

Weaving to his feet Durant stared down the draw. Macey was gone. He had not killed him then. There'd be signs, the prints of Macey's horse. He saw tracks on the wet sand and stumbled to them, but they were only cow tracks. He staggered on, arms hanging.

Durant searched long, but he found no sign. At last he climbed the slope to the dead campfire. Something glittered—Macey's gun! Durant knelt and, his hand shaking, reached to lift it.

Again he halted.

A skeleton lay in the ashes, crumbling bones that had been a man. That had been Ellis Macey. Durant tried to rise, but it seemed the sky was turning black. Suddenly he collapsed beside the fire. It was then daybreak, the morning of September 23rd.

At sun-up on the morning of October 1st Durant walked slowly toward the grove of cottonwoods behind the ranchhouse of the Broken Arrow. He was going to a six-gun trial; his own. Behind him followed Andrew Bell, the Cochise County sheriff, and a posse, the best men of Sulphur Valley. Their eyes were hard. It had been a gruesome killing, Ellis Macey's murder, and the evidence was all against Durant.

A hair *riata* with a slip-noose at its end dangled from the low branch of a cottonwood. Under the tree a pinto horse stood saddled. As Durant saw the horse he halted and swung round.

"Thanks," he said, "for the chance to fork old Badman at the last. This here's a trial; but I'm due to hang, I know."

A young rider stepping from the posse faced Durant. His eyes were sinister, his alkali-rimmed lips trembled. He sprang in, struck Durant across the cheek. It was a heavy blow. Blood started from a half-healed bullet gash on Durant's temple.

The man cried harshly:

"You dog! Hanging's too easy. I'd stake you in the desert with a rattler on a thong. Apache death!"

DURANT'S face flamed. Then the killer light in his eyes died. He answered brokenly:

"Wade, I never meant to harm yore uncle. Macey—he was givin' me my chance t' play it straight." He walked on into the shade of the fluttering silver-leafed trees. As he came close the horse nuzzled him. Durant's hands, lashed with a tie-rope of hard-fibered sisal, clenched.

Sheriff Bell wheeled on the men behind him suddenly.

"Boys," he said, "fer th' last time—this ain't law. I warn yuh all I won't stand by; my badge means somethin'. If Durant killed Ellis Macey, he shud hang. But law is

law. I'm takin' him t' Tombstone fer a jury trial."

The posse moved a step ahead. Bell, his lips tightening, spoke once again.

"Macey'd be th' last to want this. He stood fer th' law an' taught a many of you to go straight. You, Wade Macey, that wuz nothin' but a tinhorn gambler till he took you in, shud know. You're doin' him a wrong. Hit's six-gun law, not justice."

FRANK SPENCE, foreman of the Broken Arrow, strode from the posse. His gaunt hawk face was bitter, he stood twisting his Stetson brim, gazing at Durant through slitted eyes.

"I'm right, Frank, about Ellis," urged the sheriff. "You trailed with him in th' ole Apache days; you knowed his mind."

"An Injun never done more foul a murder," Spence said. "An' Durant cached that coin, two thousand dollars in a buckskin bag. Young Macey here is busted if it's gone." He looked at Wade Macey, then at Bell. "Make him tell what he done with Ellis Macey's money. And then, thumb-hang the killer, I say."

A low murmur rippled through the men. But Durant's eyes were wide. He stared at Spence and his lips formed the words, "a buckskin bag."

Bell slowly shook his head.

"Frank, I figgered you'd back my play," he said. Then frowning at the posse, "I want Durant. Yuh got no hanging evidence."

Spence laughed harshly.

"Hangin' evidence? Listen, men," he began, telling the points off on his fingers: "On the 20th of September Durant an' Ellis Macey left th' Broken Arrow t' collect fer a bunch of calves sold t' th' T-Bar-2 in the San Pedro. A week later they was still amissin', so Wade, four waddies an' myself, hits fer th' hills.

"We finds Ellis Macey's body, jest th' bones, in a dead campfire in Boothill Canyon. Also, layin' in th' ashes, Macey's gun. We finds Durant, too, aside the fire, sick with bullet fever. Durant claims they was another *hombre* in th' play, but we finds no trail sign in th' canyon; only cattle tracks—"

The sheriff broke in quickly: "Durant admits 'twas h i m shot Macey. Hit were an accident, he claims."

Spence laughed again but his eyes were deadly.

"Why would I rub him out?" Durant said, his voice low. "Macey—the first to deal me a square hand. I shot him, unmeaning. We was ambushed, we scattered, a slug creased me—I was bullet-dazed. When he come ridin' back I thought *he* was th' killer. I didn't see his white coat till too late. They *was* another *hombre* in th' play."

The posse remained silent. Durant read his sentence in their faces. He stared at Spence. How did the foreman know that Macey'd changed the money to that buckskin bag?

The sheriff raised his hand.

"Guilty or not guilty, Durant belongs to me. Do I git him? I calls fer yore vote."

Spence cried:

"I vote—he hangs!"

THE posse echoed his words, deep-throated. Guns scraped from holsters, suddenly the grove was still. But Durant touched the sheriff's arm.

"Hit's no use. Let's git done with this."

Bell's hand on the grip of his six-gun checked. He gazed at Durant, then at the ring of men. His mild sun-faded eyes were troubled. Slowly his hand fell from the gun.

"Y're doin' wrong, boys," he said bitterly. "Hit ain't law; ner justice

neither." But he turned away as though admitting his defeat.

And Spence gripped Durant's shirt, thrust him toward the paint horse. Men moved to the corral behind the cottonwoods. They rode back, and one took the end of the *riata* that hung from the branch gave it a half hitch around his saddle-horn.

Macafee and Virgil Blanton of the Broken Arrow lifted Durant to his saddle. Spence swung to saddle and, pushing close, began fitting the noose on Durant's throat.

Durant said: "Cinch her, Spence. Yuh don't want no misfire—yuh, an' yore *buckskin bag*."

THE foreman paused. He stared angrily, but Durant's face remained expressionless. Spence finished tightening the hang-knot and dismounted. As he sprang down his pearl-handled Colt slid from the holster.

He picked up the gun and held it to his lips, blowing sand-grit from the action.

He stood close to Durant, the Colt in easy reach. But Durant's hands were tied. The posse were all on the ground now except the rider with the hang rope dallied to his saddle-horn. Andrew Bell moved to Durant's side. Durant, looking down, saw the sheriff's lips move, caught the whispered words:

"I'm—cuttin'—th' wrist ties. Make fer—Spence's quarter's in the bunkhouse. We kin—stand 'em off—in thar—"

And suddenly the rope on Durant's wrists was slack. But he sat quiet in the saddle watching Frank Spence twirl the chamber of his gun, the weapon held before his eyes. The sheriff began walking slowly toward the bunkhouse. He reached the door, turned and raised his arm.

Lightning fast, Durant moved. He flicked the looped *riata* from his throat, lunged sidewise, striking the six-gun from the foreman's hand. The paint horse reared—leaped forward, steel-shod hoofs lashing out. The men broke, but they were twitching Colts from holsters. Lead would be whistling like a hail storm.

Durant gave a quick glance toward the purple shadows of the mountains—safety there. But old Andy Bell had played the man; he couldn't go.

He whirled, heading for the bunkhouse, half over the saddle, hanging by the mane, his boot-toe hooked into the cinch. The pony raced across the grove of cottonwoods. Bullets spanged the tree trunks. Crashing gunfire reverberated through the grove.

As his horse tore by the bunkhouse wall, Durant kicked loose. He hit the ground, rolled over, came up running. Bell swung the bunkhouse door, he dived in. The panel banged, a dozen bullets splintering the wood. Then the sheriff helped him to his feet.

"Best place t' stand siege," he said, his voice calm. "Frank, bein' an ole gun-fighter, allus keeps his tools about."

THE glass in the window by him shivered, a slug whacked the wall. Bell's cool glance searched the room.

He took a broken branding iron from a shelf.

"Make us some gun slots," he remarked. "Keep clear of the window, them boys know what the bead on a rifle's fer."

He began hacking at the wall with the iron shaft. Durant turned to the gun rack. Over it hung Indian curios, war-bonnets, Apache daggers, flint hatchets. There were a half dozen rifles in the rack.

Durant took down a hex-barreled Winchester, tried the balance, worked the lever. It had the right heft and

the magazine was filled. He swung. Bell had a 'dobe brick loose now and was peering through, gnawing at a plug of black tobacco while he gazed.

"Don't seem like they mean t' rush us," he muttered. "But, make yuh a hole in th' south wall, anyway. Ef they do come, aim fer th' legs. Most of 'em's my friends, the dumb mule-headed rannies—I don't want t' rub none of 'em out."

DURANT took the branding iron and started chiseling the 'dobe bricks. He worked fast, urged by the sing of bullets plumping into the wall outside. But Durant's thoughts were dark. This was a fool move all round. Two dozen men out there, and primed to kill. Bell had tricked them; they'd get him in the end for doing it.

Wrong, Durant thought, to let the old man in for this.

The rod broke through the wall. He twisted it, enlarged the hole and looked out. From the scale-barked trunks of the cottonwoods rifles were spurting intermittently. Powder smoke hung like a haze under the branches.

But half the posse had drawn off, and were circling a low swale out of rifle range, behind which the hay barn stood. They rolled a hay rack piled with tindery gramma-grass into the open. Durant straightened.

"The showdown," he said. "They mean to smoke us out. I'll stay an' take it, but you go. I think yuh done wrong anyway. I—shot Ellis Macey. Mebbe I'm lyin' when I claim I done it accidental. Not worth bein' shot up over, is it?"

Bell drew his chin in, gazed at Durant. His faded eyes had kindled with a frosty light.

"Son, I'm *law* in this here Sulphur Valley. No posse tuk a pris'ner yit, from Andrew Bell. *That's* wuth bein' shot up over, yes, you bet." He sent a stream of brown juice through the shattered window glass and drew a hand thoughtfully across his lips.

"Durant," he went on as if thinking aloud, "yuh got a bad name in the valley. An' yore story's loco. Yuh say some *hombre* dry-gulched yuh an' Ellis Macey. Well, I'll grant thet Ellis might 'a' caught the *hombre's* hoss an' rid back t' th' fire. An yuh *might* 'a' shot him accidental, an' he might 'a' fell into th' blaze. Hit's hard t' swallow—but might be. An' we find Ellis' bones, his gun.

"But, here's th' rub. We found *no hoss sign* in th' canyon near yuh. An' there was rain thet night in th' Dragoons, so th' trail would still read plain. Th' dry wash, which I studies careful, shows jest th' print of yore paint hoss, an' Ellis' roan. A good half mile along th' gulch. Aside from them—no sign; nothin' only cow tracks."

DURANT, watching through the rifle slot, said shortly:

"Time t' leave—they're comin'."

The hay wagon with six men on the tongue backed rumbling down the slope into the grove. A fusillade of firing covered its advance. Bell, dropping to his knees, crawled to Durant. Thrusting him aside, he looked out.

"Spence's hand in thet. An ole-time Injun-fighter, Frank, knows all the tricks. We'll have t' hunt new cover."

But Durant frowned.

"Walk out of here, old man," he urged. "Hustle—they'll be touchin' her off."

For answer the sheriff poked his six-gun through the slot. It thudded two quick jarring beats, a wisp of powder smoke sucked backward through the hole.

Bell muttered:

"Sorry, Whitey." Then to Durant,

"Whitey Penfield of the Rail N got careless, pushin' thet hay-cart. I jes' scored his thigh. But they keep comin'! Boy, we'll have t' do some earnest shootin' soon. Confound thet feller Spence!"

"*Vamos*, old man," Durant said again. "But I want t' tell you one thing first. Watch Spence. He made a slip today. Here's what I mean, Bell. When we left th' San Pedro with the cash Macey had thet money in his saddle-bags. But he changed it to a buckskin pouch, *that night*, not a minute 'fore the rifle cut me down. You *sabe?* Nobody seen him shift the money excep' me. But today Spence, speakin' of it, says: 'Two thousand dollars in a buckskin bag.'"

"Chris'mus!" muttered the sheriff. "Spence?" He whistled softly. "Why, Frank *couldn't* be mixed up in this. Him an' Ellis Macey been like brothers, half th' Broken Arrow goes to Spence by Macey's will."

Hoarse shouts lifted from the grove. The rumble of the wagon wheels grew louder.

Bell cried:

"Take th' other slot! Fight—blast yuh—y're my deputy, y' hear!"

HE rammed his Colt into the opening, five shots burst in staccato thunder from the gun. Jerking brass shells from his cartridge belt he bent to reload.

Outside the bunkhouse rifles crashed. Slugs whined through the windows; powdery dust showered from the walls.

Durant, running to the second loophole, thrust the barrel of his rifle through. But his heart wasn't in the fight. Yes, he'd killed before; and this was his one chance. But with Ellis Macey dead, he didn't want that chance. He'd earned a gun-smoke finish, anyway. The killer's tally—you couldn't rub it out. He thumbed the rifle hammer back, his finger crooked about the trigger. But Durant did not finish out the pull.

The wagon crashed against the 'dobe wall. And Bell with a warning shout sprang to the door. He turned.

"Shoot yore way t' th' corral! Hosses there—we'll make a ride fer town."

He swung the door wide and a slug rapped a dust cloud from his coat.

The gun went spinning from the sheriff's hand, he staggered three steps, fell in a sprawling heap.

SMOKE from the burning hay sucked in the broken window and poured through the bunkhouse door. The attack shifted. Bullets screamed over the sill, gouging out great chunks of 'dobe clay. Dust mingled with the suffocating smoke. The room, filling with the black smoke, grew dark as night. Durant crept to the window and looked out. Smoke everywhere; the grove was wreathed with grey fog and lighted redly by the rifle flashes.

Durant listened to the hoarse shouts of the posse, his lips twisting in a bitter smile. They'd kill him like a rat. They'd already shot Andy Bell. Because he backed the law. It was another kind of law they wanted; six-gun law. Slowly Durant's expression changed. His face set; a cold gleam lighted his black eyes. His hand cramped the rifle stock.

Six-gun law—*that* was the law he knew. They'd get him, but he'd go out fighting. His lead would brand some others for the long trail, too. If he could take Spence! Spence, who, he was sure, had murdered Ellis Macey on that stormy night in Boothill Canyon.

He crouched, jumped over the sill. Striking bent-kneed on the sand, Durant whipped the rifle to his thigh. Guns barked, slugs

whistled overhead, but none came close. Smoke drift lay like a blanket over everything. Good cover.

Durant's eyes narrowed. Maybe—yes, there was a chance to break through. He'd try. Then later he'd come back for Spence. Durant dropped to his breast in the smoke and crawled toward the pole fence of the horse corral.

HE moved a dozen yards. The sod roof of the bunkhouse fell with a muffled crash, a tower of sparks leaped high. The blast of the concussion rolled aside the smoky curtain, and that instant Durant sprang to his feet. Lead was driving at him from a dozen rifles as he plunged for the corral fence.

He swarmed the sapling barricade, dropped to the ground inside. A string of fifty ponies milled in the enclosure. As Durant's glance sorted them, his paint horse shouldered through the press and trotted to him in a sidewise gait to miss the dragging lines. Durant gave a low cry. Luck was holding.

The posse had caught up Badman, penned him.

Three strides—he leaped into the saddle. The paint horse, as Durant's legs scraped leather, whirled. Durant spurred him for the five-barred gate. Badman, rising at the barrier in a steel-wire spring, struck, forelegs stiffened, on the other side. Snatching the bit, the horse jumped forward in a pounding run.

Durant crouched low, one hand gripping the pony's mane, the other feeling for his saddle scabbard. He found it, shoved the Winchester down. A fusillade of gunfire burst. Bullets kicked up sand, spatted in the mesquite flickering by. Durant did not return the fire.

He stared at the distant foothills overcast with the blue-black shadows of the mountain peaks. Five miles ahead a yellow gash sliced through the hills, the mouth of Jackpine Canyon. To reach that notch meant safety. There were caves in the rock ledges, Apache hide-outs, where no man could pick up sign.

Hoof-beats drummed the sand behind, and Durant touched the paint horse with a spurred heel. Badman tore on, ears flattened, his blunt head outstretched. Foam flecks splashed the saddle skirt. Badman was running at top speed, his stave-like ribs heaved and sank convulsively as he charged up the stiffening grade. But Durant knew his mount. There was Morgan stock in Badman; he'd go on until his stout heart burst.

The ground grew rough. Badman skidded down a stony draw, plunged up a steep side-hill. Bullets clanged on the flinty soil and streams of loose gravel tinkled down. But the thunder of the guns was fading, the clatter of hoof-beats slowly dimming out.

Durant touched spurs again, felt the horse under him answer in a surge of power.

OVER another ridge, the green of the canyon wall close now. Up a third boulder-littered rise, down into a wide gravel wash. Badman plowed through the soft sand, breath whistling, lather soaping the edges of the saddle blanket. Trees appeared at a bend in the dry stream-bed.

Durant spurred into the low-branched sycamores, then turned up a pinched fork of the wash. The ascent became precipitous, huge boulders choked the narrowing arroyo. Badman was staggering, almost done. At last Durant halted. He slid down, shook his rifle free. Loosening the cinch, he lifted his saddle, tossed it in a manzanita clump.

"Badman, I reckon they won't take us now," he muttered. His hand clapped the steaming flank and the

paint horse swung, moved slowly down the narrow draw. Durant watched him for a moment, then he vanished in the brush.

THE sun sank down behind the rims of the Dragoons. The Sulphur Valley posse began returning to the ranchhouse of the Broken Arrow. All day they had scoured the foothills, but they had not found the outlaw, George Durant.

From a high peak that overlooked the valley, Durant watched them drifting in across the sand. He marked each rider. Durant knew them all. But the man he looked for did not come, and a second rider was still missing when darkness spread its cloak over the desert.

Durant watched till he could see only the twinkling lights of the ranch buildings against the darkness. Then he rose and struck down the mountain on a short trail for Boothill Canyon. All day he had been thinking of Ellis Macey's murder. And of the sheriff's words: "No sign, only cattle tracks."

That ghostly horse and rider—maybe they were shadows, sent to square the killer tally. But something told Durant he must go on to Boothill Canyon.

Long hours he walked, following the ridges, crossing down into deep draws, climbing reef-like slopes. Nearly midnight when Durant came out on the east rim of Boothill Canyon. It was touched now by the faint glow of a waning moon. Clouds, scudding fast across the sky, shuttered the ghostly moonlight on and off.

A cold thrill crossed Durant. He recalled the lightning on the night of Macey's killing.

In his mind's eye he visioned a shadowy horseman riding from the darkness.

Suddenly he stiffened. Down canyon, on the opposite slope, he saw a man among the rotting crosses. The figure rose, plainly outlined, as the moon slid from a cloud. Durant with a low cry, threw gun-butt to shoulder. Fate had dealt him the hole card; the man was Frank Spence, foreman of the Broken Arrow.

But Durant's hands were trembling, he could not hold the notch against the bead. He lowered the gun, his heart hammering. This was his chance—a chance to even things that might not come again.

And the first shot must be good, Spence must not get away. Slowly the storm of shivering left him. Durant's eyes turned chill. He lifted the rifle.

Moonlight glinted on the barrel, he held the figure on the hillside centered in his sights.

The harsh slam of a gun. Spence leaped up, fell, a crumpled shape among the graves.

But with the sound a look of stark amazement crossed Durant's face. Lowering the rifle, he touched the hammer. It was at full cock, the barrel cold. The bullet that had cut Spence down had not come from his gun!

He was staring about him, searching the canyon slopes, the sandy floor of the wash below.

THEN in the silence a sound came, the slow shuffle of hoof-beats. Durant stood trembling, held by an awful fascination. He knew that ghostly horseman was riding through the dark again. Gripping the rifle in his shaking hands, he stared into the canyon depths—

And, once more, toward him came the lame horse carrying its ghostly rider. Dismounting, the figure climbed the canyon wall and knelt among the crosses by the body of Frank Spence. A moment, then it had climbed down the hill again and swung to saddle. Horse and

rider vanished in the black reaches of the canyon.

Cold sweat stood out on Durant's forehead; he shivered, fighting to gain self-control. Was it living man or ghost that he had seen? Suddenly Durant drew up. Man or ghost, that rider held the key to Ellis Macey's death. And though the trail might lead to hell, he'd follow it.

RIFLE at hip, Durant began moving down the canyon wall. He reached the sandy floor, crept on in cover of the brush. "Trail sign," the words of Andrew Bell, came to his thoughts. He bent, searching the sand for the prints of the ghostly rider's mount.

If he found them—that would prove it was a man he followed, not a ghost.

He broke through a gopher burrow, stumbled and plunged forward to his knees. And the moonlight filtering through the clouds, showed him the prints he sought. But they were "only cattle tracks."

Maybe his brain had snapped—But Durant crawled forward. On the slope above he heard Spence's feeble groan. But he did not heed, he was following the two-toed hoofprints. They headed toward him, turned in a narrow circle and went back.

Except for them, the hard sand was unmarked.

Durant halted. Shifting emotions, doubt and disbelief, played across his face. Suddenly a grim look of understanding swept them away. His eyes cleared, gleamed with cold, chilling fire. Springing noiselessly to his feet he darted on into the canyon depths. As he ran he listened for the shuffling hoofbeats. They grew faint, died out. His stride quickened. He was sprinting now; a desperate warning hammered at his brain.

Fifty yards ahead in the deep canyon something moved. Durant stopped, his finger curved about the rifle trigger. But it was only a lame horse—a horse with four bandaged hoofs!

The saddle was empty, the mysterious rider gone.

A snap of brittle twigs reached Durant—from the brush above him on the canyon side. He stared upward, a figure was climbing the steep slope. Then came another sound, a muffled cry of agony. Durant heard that, too, and his lips turned dry, his heart seemed to check. He feared no living man; but that voice—was from the dead. Once more the cry reached him and the grip of terror broke. Durant—swift, silent—began the ascent of the canyon wall.

ALMOST under the rock rims the figure, crawling through the brush above him, disappeared. Into a cave along the ridge, perhaps. There were many of them, Durant knew. He moved on, reached the ridge. He crept along it to the cave mouth. Durant halted—frozen in his tracks.

The man he trailed stood just inside the cave. A lantern burned on the rock floor. It sent long shadows flickering over a figure staked out like a cross. The dim light showed too, a coiling mass beside the figure. The scene stamped itself on Durant's brain—then the man spoke:

"Well, I got Spence. He was rooting in the graves. Damn him, he knew those bones in the campfire were not yours. I'd made another slip before that; at the ranch. I said the cash was *in a buckskin* bag. Spence mentioned it and Durant showed he couldn't figure how Spence knew. The next thing, Spence would have noticed those Apache pony-boots were missing from his room. My play would have

gone wrong then. Cowtracks!" The man laughed and went on:

"But the bunkhouse burned today. and the boots that make cow tracks went up in smoke. Those sheep-headed punchers'll think so, anyway. Bell was wounded, but Durant got clear. He's in these mountains now. I know you told him where you hid the buckskin bag; he'll be coming for it. So—take your choice. Tell me, and die easy. But if you make me do it, I'll tie that diamond-back in striking reach—give you the Apache death you've told me of."

THE figure groaned, and the other, striding close, leaned down. He untied the gag.

"You think I won't go through? After you willed Spence a full half of the Broken Arrow and the right to hold *my* share if I as much as touch the cards? Listen, old man, I'll go through. You're dead already, and the killing pinned on George Durant. He says himself he did it. Your white slicker coat—I put it on that night when I rode back to frisk him for the gold. He sent his lead at me, missed.

"But he thinks he marked you down. And the posse found those moldy bones I dug and scattered on the fire. Them and the cow tracks my horse made—have fixed it. Spence might have spoiled things, but he's wiped out. My bullet cut an artery, he'll be dead in half an hour. Now—will you tell?"

There was silence, then a voice said brokenly:

"I cached it—in a—gopher hole—on the west slope—near the fire. May God forgive you, boy, fer this!"

"There'll be plenty on the books fer Him to tally up before I'm through," the man replied and laughed. "But till then I've got the Broken Arrow and the money, too. Unless you've lied about the cache. I'm going now to find that buckskin bag. Then I'll be back."

He turned. And seeing Durant in the cave-mouth, struck downward for his gun. Durant shot from the hip, his rifle blazed a red flare on the cavern walls. With the cracking echo the man twitched his six-gun from its scabbard. He quivered, fighting to raise the gun, but a weight seemed dragging at his hand. He gave a choking cough and stumbled forward on his face.

Durant leaped to the figure on the floor and cut the rawhide lashings. The snake hissed warningly. He crushed it with his rifle butt. Lifting the man, he said:

"I had t' do it, Ellis. It was him—er both of us."

Ellis Macey shuddered.

"Wade Macey, my own kin," he said low-voiced. It was a long time before he spoke again. At last he looked up solemnly. "That killer tally, son—yuh rubbed it out tonight, I reckon. Help me down the canyon—we got to find Frank Spence."

Johnston McCulley, Galen C. Colin, Jackson Cole, Claude Rister, Wilton West and Other Top-Hand Writers of the Ranch and Range in Next Month's Fiction Rodeo of THRILLING WESTERN!

Border Bullets

He looped his gun belt over the short gun, then jerked

Stampeding Herds, Cracking Guns and Raiding Mex Half-Breeds Confront the Owner of the Loop-E As He Strives to Save His Ranch

A Thrilling Complete Novelette

By SYL MacDOWELL

Author of "Range Pardners," "Gun Trails," etc.

CHAPTER I

End of the Drive

A MONTH on the cactus range, meeting the quick dangers of round-up, stamps a telltale mark on a man. Young Vance Patterson, owner of the Loop-E, was a little leaner, more keen-eyed, than the half-breed *vaqueros* who loafed in the doorway of the Tacate *cantina* as he entered. And the hot sun had burned him nearly as brown.

Mr. Alfred Thorpe, president of

the Border National Bank of Los Gatos, was waiting. He sat at a table with a bottle and glass in front of him. He had a soft, fat face and hard eyes with frog-belly puffs under them.

"WELL," was his abrupt greeting, "how'd the drive go?"

Vance Patterson unhooked his gun-weighted cartridge belt and swung it over a chair back. Then he sat down, facing Thorpe. He was aware, out of the corners of his eyes, that the breeds in the doorway were eyeing him.

"Bringing up five hundred head," he replied tersely. "The boys are hazing them up through the cut-off canyon now. Up toward Campo and the Border dipping pens."

"Yeah? Seen market reports lately?"

Vance said, "Bad news? Let's have it."

The banker jerked a crumpled newspaper out of his coat and slapped it on the sticky table top. Vance Patterson's eyes flicked the sheet. What he saw there was disastrous. He felt a sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach.

"Steer beef down to four and a half. Lowest price in years. Thorpe, the duty alone on my herd will run close onto ten thousand."

Thorpe's thin lips curled in a cold smile.

"You're up against it, Patterson. Look, you pay three cents a pound, live weight, on every two-three yearling that crosses the Mexican Border into California. That leaves you a gross margin of a cent and a half. Nobody can raise beef for a cent and a half, not even on open Mexican range."

Vance Patterson's mouth tightened as he licked a cigarette shut. "To say nothing of the calves I lose at the dipping pens from swallowing arsenic solution. Reckon I've got to borrow about ten thousand dollars. You crave the honor of picking my bones?"

Thorpe tossed down the glass of *habanero*. "Not me," he said, banging the glass back on the table. "Not on cow security, anyhow. Not with beef down to four and a half."

"Suppose I hold the bunch till prices go up?"

Thorpe shook his head again as he filled the glass. "It wouldn't be a quick loan in that case. Besides, what if beef *don't* go up? S'pose it drops even lower?"

Half-turning, Vance Patterson threw an arm over his chair back, close to his gun. He seemed to be gazing out across the brown hills, where a dry winter had forced him to bring the Loop-E market stuff down from the home ranch on the American side.

ACTUALLY, he was watching the breeds in the doorway. They were silent. Too silent. A month in the open gives a man a strange awareness of things about him. Patterson turned, facing Thorpe again.

"I can't turn the bunch back. No market here in Mexico for American beef."

"Course there ain't." The banker paused a moment, his eyes crafty. "Look here, Patterson, tell you what I'll do. I might let you have the ten thousand. Not on beef, but on a first mortgage on the Loop-E."

Vance Patterson gave a short, bitter laugh. "So that's your play, is it? A measly ten thousand on five sections of the best mountain grass in California!"

Thorpe's teeth clicked shut. "Take it or leave it."

"I'm leaving it. The Loop-E has been Patterson ground since stagecoach days. I reckon I won't be robbed of it with a lead pencil."

Patterson felt sick inside. For years Thorpe had been trying to get

control of the Loop-E. His grip was tightening now, and the man was shrewd enough to realize his advantage.

Slowly he drew a thick wallet from his hip, laid it between them. The edges of a crisp bundle of new yellow-backed currency peeked from the bulging leather. He laid a pen and a mortgage blank beside the money.

Vance Patterson pushed them aside. "I'm not the fly for your molasses barrel, Thorpe."

The banker didn't pick up the spurned yellowbacks. Instead, he twirled his glass between thick fingers. Patterson sent him a searching glance from under lowered eyelids. Thorpe's eyes were not on him. They traveled over Patterson's shoulder, toward those *bravos* in the doorway.

"Think it over and think fast," Thorpe was saying rapidly. "In ten minutes I leave, for Los Gatos."

"No you won't," Patterson contradicted. "There's only one road out of here and the boys have it blocked by now. They're in the cut-off canyon between here and Campo, with the five hundred head. You can't ride through that canyon for an hour yet."

THORPE'S arm jerked across the table top. It looked too deliberate to be accidental. His empty glass crashed to the floor. He gasped an oath, his eyes on the doorway, staring. But the crash acted as a signal. Booted feet shuffled in the doorway. Vance Patterson, nerves tingling, came to his feet, looping an arm through his gun belt.

He was a split second too late. Something jabbed him in the ribs, hard. He whirled. The big breed, the one with yellow, tigerish eyes, faced him. He held that blunt gun with steady pressure.

"Porque? Why the hurry, *senor?"* the breed purred in Patterson's face. "Sit down."

He swung his muzzle on Thorpe then, lazily, a trifle too confident of Patterson's obedience. In a flashing movement, Patterson looped his gun belt over the short gun, and jerked.

The gun blasted. The bottle of *habanero* on the table exploded, filling the *cantina* with flying jagged pieces. Patterson had his own .45 out. But midway in that lightning draw, someone leaped behind him. Patterson's head felt like it exploded. He dropped, more stunned than hurt; a Stetson top muffles the heaviest six-gun butt.

HE had wits enough to belly over on his gun as the tiger-eyed one kicked at it. Then he caught a blurred glimpse of the big breed scooping up Thorpe's wallet and plunging for the doorway.

It was a fast, neat job. The big breed forked Thorpe's horse, a buckskin mare, and made a dust streak up the road, toward the Border. His *companero,* who had slugged Patterson, was fumbling at the tied reins of Patterson's roan as Patterson got up and staggered to the door. He ducked the gust of a sudden death from Patterson's .45, then made for a Mexican sorrel five feet down the hitch-rack.

A second later there were twin dust streaks on the road.

Patterson steadied his swaying gun against the door jamb. He was sighting for a sure target, leaning low over the leather, when someone jarred his elbow, knocking his aim crazy. It was Thorpe.

Again it looked more like a deliberate move than an accident.

"They got my ten thousand and they got my mare!" Thorpe babbled. "And they got away. Why didn't you stop 'em?"

Patterson got a twist-hold on Thorpe's coat lapels and shoved him back in a chair with a bang. "Listen,

you. I'm going to smash you flatter than a toad in a rut. When I get that money back—"

His words trailed off as he leaped to the hitch-rack. He vaulted to his saddle and, ignoring Thorpe's yelp, spurred in pursuit of the two hold-ups.

But he didn't take their dust long. One hundred yards away from the *cantina* he swayed to the right and the roan tore onto a trail that branched from the road. He knew that trail. It led across the chaparral-covered hills toward the American town of Campo, the same as the road. Only it consumed about one-half the distance, and cut back into the road above the cut-off canyon.

Even though a goose egg was swelling on top of his head, Vance Patterson's thoughts were traveling faster than the roan's flying hoofs. He was beginning to piece together the incidents immediately preceding the robbery.

The rushing wind was clearing his thoughts. The things that he had been only vaguely aware of back there in the *cantina* now struck his brain with the force of certainty.

FOR one thing, Thorpe had been watching these breeds in the doorway. Expectantly, almost, as though he knew what was going to happen. Why? Had he planned on having himself robbed? That seemed crazy. Or had he figured on the breeds' relieving Patterson of that ten thousand after it had changed hands? That seemed more probable. In that case, the tiger-eyed *senor* and his companion had grabbed the money too soon. They had mistaken Thorpe's cue.

"No wonder Thorpe was flustered and grabbed my arm when I was about to shoot!" Vance Patterson smiled grimly. "Well, the thing for me to do now is reach the cut-off canyon *in time.*"

One thing was certain. The breeds were going to need brakes when they caught up with the herd choking the narrow defile.

CHAPTER II

The Death Trail

THE roan had scrambled up to a bare, wind-blown ridge now, where the trail twisted among great, fantastic granite boulders. The animal's ears lifted as he ran with great, space-devouring strides. Cow scent was in his nostrils. The herd was in the gorge.

Soon horse and rider reached the rim, where the slanting sun was golden in a thin stratum of dust. Through it Patterson looked down on a restless sea of backs and horns. He heard the faint yips of the Loop-E riders.

At that same instant, a quarter-mile downgrade, two horsemen burst into view. They vanished, then reappeared around a sharp turn appreciably closer. Something flashed in the sun. *Senor* Tiger-Eyes was brandishing that blunt-barreled gun.

Vance Patterson flung himself from leather, dropped the reins and sprawled lizard-like across the hot top of a boulder. The gun that had been his father's and grandfather's in the days when the Loop-E spread was young came to his hand with grim sureness. A tiny, ominous click sounded as he drew back the hammer, narrowed eyes estimating the range. Two hundred yards where fugitives and tail of the herd were due to meet.

Bill Stevens, Patterson's white-mustached, loyal old major domo, was tailing the herd. Two other hands were riding circle. A youngster named Masters was leading, a

half mile or so ahead. Bill Stevens heard the galloping pair coming up from behind. He raised a warning, detaining hand.

The two breeds did not slow down. They uttered wild yells, like hostile Comanches. *Senor* Tiger-Eyes shot. Bill Stevens, surprise stamped on his fine old face, crumpled forward, swayed, then fell. A gush of blood streaked his *tappadero.*

PATTERSON, cursing inwardly for not shooting sooner, course-sighted and pulled. Thorpe's horse stumbled, hit a straggling yearling in the rump, and the two animals bowled to the dust. *Senor* Tiger-Eyes was thrown clear.

Patterson sighted still coarser next shot. The second breed reined sharply in, his own gun drawn, scanning the rocky slopes for this unseen attacker.

The two circle riders closed in. But the cattle were stampeding now, bawling, milling, climbing and trampling one another. Their bawling filled the narrow canyon, rising in a crescendo that drowned out Patterson's next two shots.

In this resistless torrent the circle riders were caught up, helpless as chips in a whirlpool. Up in the lead, young Masters was trying to check the sudden, unaccountable forward surge of that wall of young beef.

The big breed was on his feet, limping. One of Patterson's slugs spat dust at his feet. The breed hopped nimbly sidewise, forgetting his limp. Low behind the wavering wall of backs and horns, he swung the blunt gun and one of the circle men vanished under murderous hoofs. His riderless horse began pitching, stirrups flying.

The other breed spotted Patterson now and began answering his fire. A bullet clinked off the hot boulder. The two breeds then swung on the one circle rider, bearing down on them. Which one got him, Patterson could not tell. But he uttered a tortured groan as he watched the circle rider grip his horn, stiffen grotesquely, then vanish in the billowing dust.

The big breed captured Bill Stevens' bewildered bay. His companion deserted his runt of a Mexican cayuse for one of the circle rider's animals. Vance Patterson was reloading when the two of them wheeled and bolted back the way they had come.

Bill Stevens raised on one elbow and pumped red-hot vengeance after them. But agonizing pain blurred his old eyes. The shots went wild.

Masters was trying to buck the tide of cattle but was forced to give it up as a bad job. And he was far out of gunshot. Patterson emptied another cylinder as they went. At the last shot the big breed gripped his left hand under his right armpit, held it a moment clamped tight, then raised bullet-burned knuckles in a fist and shook it back at the man up on the boulder.

PATTERSON leaped up and started down the slope, sliding, stumbling, digging in his high heels so unfitted to this kind of going. His roan scrambled after him, at the end of taut reins. One of the circle riders got up out of the dust, his face pallid under its thick coating. He had a red, dripping furrow across his right cheek bone. He dashed blood from his eyes, cursing:

"What was the ruckus, boss? I did my damnedest to get into it."

Vance slapped down on his knees at Bill Stevens' side. The major domo was flat, still gripping his gun. Patterson yelled at the tottering circle rider.

"Get your horse! And that Mex bronc! Help me pile Bill across a

saddle, then ride for Campo with him like hell was at your heels!"

"But the herd, boss—"

"The devil with the herd! The devil with everything! If there's a doctor in Campo, Bill still has a chance." He ripped off a strip of his own shirt and wadded it into tampions to staunch the blood flow, front and back, on Stevens' body. The old fellow grinned up at him weakly.

"Ain't it hell? With me just one hour off from the fust good American likker in thirty days."

They heaved him as tenderly as possible into the breed's abandoned saddle. "Now get going!" snapped Patterson. "Shoot your way through, man! Shoot!"

The circle rider was astride by now, his neckerchief bandaged across one cheek and covering an eye. "And you, boss—"

"I'm going to hang two hides on some fence."

The circle rider gave a yell and started through the scattered herd standing in small, scattered bands. They high-tailed for the stunted willows of the creek bottom as he went, his gun pounding echoes from the slopes. Bill Stevens hugged close behind, arms crossed across the horn, head bent and teeth clenched in his lips against the jarring hurt in his body.

THEN Vance Patterson pounded down the road at a dead run, his blazing eyes on the hoofprints of two stolen Loop-E horses in the road dust. No man who had raided Loop-E stock had ever lived long. No breed who killed loyal Loop-E men had ever survived to face a jury.

Vance Patterson was on the blood trail. The trail that knew no turning back until he had wiped out his debt with *Senor* Tiger-Eyes and his villainous accomplice. A debt of death.

About a mile south, where the gorge widened, the riders' tracks left the hoof-ground roadway and swerved into a winding sand wash. A few hundred yards of this and the trail turned sharply up a yucca-studded slope to a hogback. Patterson had expected that. It was the custom in this brushy country to ride the bare ridges.

AT the crest he halted to breathe the spent roan, and to scan the rolling chaparral for some sign of his quarry. He uttered an exclamation of grim satisfaction at a brief glimpse of them. The two breeds were crossing a gun-sight pass a half mile ahead.

Beyond the pass, Patterson knew, lay Dos Lobos, a line rider's camp beside a small *ceinega* or waterhole. *Senor* Tiger-Eyes and his *companero* were making for Dos Lobos, then. Patterson spurred on, his progress faster now. Gone was the need for watching against ambush; and he had an advantage. The two breeds evidently did not realize they were being followed.

Patterson passed through the gap a scant ten minutes behind them. He carried his .45 at ready, across the saddle in front of him. Now the country opened up; an alkali sink, in whose center was the bright green of mesquite and willows surrounding the *ceinega*.

Close beside the low trees was a tumbledown adobe house—the line riders' camp, and beside it a small pole corral.

In the corral stood two horses. The distance was too great to recognize them, but Vance Patterson knew they were his—Loop-E stock.

But it would be suicide to cross that open flat in broad daylight. He would be seen before he got halfway to the line camp; and the two breeds were fortified behind the thick walls of the adobe. They could pick

him off before he could see their guns.

Patterson pulled into the shade of a thicket and dismounted. Torn though he was by a restless urge to fight it out with the pair, he forced himself to wait. He loosened the cinch on the roan. Then he squatted cross-legged, and built himself a smoke.

He lay back and watched the blue smoke curl up in the still air. Up toward the hot sky, two buzzards circled incessantly. Were they waiting for human carrion? Or were their eyes on the scattered Loop-E herd, off to the north?

When cattle stampede in rough, dry country, they leave carcasses in their dust.

CHAPTER III

Guns in the Dark

NOT until moonrise did Vance Patterson ride on. His beacon was a tiny light that shone across the flat from a window of the adobe. Nearing the *ceinega*, the roan scented the water and quickened his pace. It was then that Vance Patterson swung to the ground. He looped his reins over the saddle horn and whacked the eager, thirsty animal on the rump. With a nicker, the roan trotted off in the dark.

Vance knew that the two breeds would hear the hoofbeats and the jangling bit chains. He crouched low and waited. After a short interval the light in the adobe blinked out.

"Now for a little Injun stalking," he muttered to himself. At a crouching run he headed for the back of the adobe. He knew the wary breeds would be out by the corral, watching with desert-trained eyes to recognize the nocturnal intruder.

Within fifty yards of the back wall of the adobe he halted and flattened himself. His senses were as alert as a wild animal's. A long, tense moment and a voice drifted to him:

"*Por Dios!* The *caballo* is riderless!"

"Into the corral with it, then, Manuel." This was the tiger-eyed one. Patterson recognized the purring voice and the chuckle that followed. "And a fine saddle, too, no? We did well with those *Americano vaqueros.* A horse follows us, but they do not. *Bueno!*"

Patterson heard the corral bars drop. Dimly he made out the silhouettes of his quarry. He began creeping forward.

He was at the side of the adobe, a few feet from the doorway, as the two breeds returned from the corral, still discussing their coup. Patterson thrust his .45 around the wall.

"Paw for the moon, you *hombres!*" he rapped out.

Instead of obeying, they sprang apart. Quick as the fanged strike of a rattler, a six-gun spurted fire. A bullet sprayed Patterson with particles of earth from the wall. His .45 spoke then, spitting flame in answer to the breed's fast shot. A grunt, then the thud of a gun falling to the ground. Patterson swung his gun on the other breed as he leaped for the doorway. The .45 roared again. The breed fell on his face on the threshold, screaming Spanish oaths.

THE first one was still on his feet, staggering.

"Walk toward me," Patterson ordered in Spanish.

The breed—it was the big one—dropped. Patterson saw him pawing for his fallen gun. He poured three quick shots out of the .45. *Senor* Tiger-Eyes lay still now;

Patterson advanced swiftly from the wall. He scooped up the breed's gun, the same blunt six-shooter the man had used in the *cantina* hold-up, thrust it into his waistband, then rolled the breed over on his back. A bullet hole gushed darkly in the left shoulder. Two other widening blotches showed, one in the chest, the other in the groin.

Senor El Tigre would steal no more.

BUT the breed in the doorway stirred and cried out. Patterson quickly entered the adobe, lighted the still warm lantern, and brought it to the door. Stooping beside the man, he saw the eyes were glazing; blood flecked the gasping lips.

Patterson said, "Thorpe hired you? *Andale,* quick, the truth. Before you die."

The breed Manuel raised his head, nodding weakly, "*Si, Senor* Thorpe." He choked and his head dropped. A convulsive breath, and Manuel's body tensed. He raised himself to an elbow. Patterson leaned over him, nerves strained to catch the slightest word. Manuel was going fast.

"*El banco,*" he gasped. "I geev it back—" Manuel plunged a hand inside his shirt. The effort was too much. He dropped again, with a shuddering cough, and went limp.

Patterson took the roll of bills from the dead hand. By the smoky lantern he counted them.

He whistled softly. "Just an even five thousand," he said to himself. "That means these two *hombres* split it. And Thorpe put 'em up to the robbery, to bust me. He was so dead certain I'd grab his dirty proposition. Huh!"

Leaving the scattered heap of money on the doorstep, Vance searched *El Tigre.* The big breed's pocket yielded the other five thousand. The roll was blood-stained and creased through the middle by one of the .45 slugs.

He rolled the money into a wad, picked up the lantern and went into the adobe. There was coffee on the stove, a half-devoured stack of *tortillas,* and on a shelf a sparse assortment of canned goods.

By the time he had finished eating, Vance Patterson had struggled to a silent decision. It was his money, by all rules of the border. But in the eyes of the law, it still belonged to Thorpe. And Vance Patterson was stacking his play on the law's side.

So he went out into the corral, selected the freshest of the three horses, threw his own saddle into it, and rode away from Dos Lobos. He left the two sprawled corpses in front of the adobe.

But he did not head for the Campo road.

He struck off in a northwesterly direction toward Los Gatos. Toward Los Gatos, and the Border National. His chaps pocket bulged with ten thousand dollars in currency. And he planned to get ten thousand dollars' worth of satisfaction by throwing the blood-wet wad in Thorpe's flesh-padded face.

He hummed a ditty of the cactus range to the rising moon as he jogged along. Perhaps Vance Patterson would not have sung had he known what awaited him at Los Gatos.

THE first peacock rays of dawn were chasing the moon out of the sky when he reached the town. The main street still slumbered—all except an all-night saloon and a feed lot where a twinkling lantern told him that some roustabout was already astir.

He put his horse up and, going to the saloon, found a back table and ordered rye. When the bartender brought it, Patterson asked

with as much carelessness as he could summon:

"Thorpe in town?"

The bartender grinned through a week's stubble of beard.

"I'll say he is! Came in just afore midnight. Sore as a boiled owl about sumthin' er other. On a borried horse."

Patterson nodded, tossed down the rye, then laid his aching head on his crossed arms on the tabletop.

When he woke up the sun was high and streaming through the swinging doors. He got up, stretched, yawned, took another drink and went out into the street. He got his horse from the feed lot and went to the bank.

THE Border National, a more imposing building than the rest of Los Gatos' business houses, stood on the corner. It was built of stone and cement, and had plate glass windows. Patterson dismounted and looked in. Thorpe was at a desk behind the grill. His eyes were more puffed than on the preceding afternoon; his thin hair was in disarray; he looked extremely worried. Patterson would have understood the cause had he known that the banker had just received word that the bank examiner was due to pay the institution an official call.

Patterson strode inside, his long spurs jangling on the polished floor.

Thorpe looked up, gasped, then sprang to his feet. A craftly look shot into his eyes. Then to Patterson's amazement, the banker raised his soft, pudgy hands over his head.

Patterson understood Thorpe's strategy almost instantly. In one leap he was at the grilled window. His .45 flashed from his hip. He rasped out a demand never before heard in the annals of Border gunplay.

"Down with your hands, you fish-eyed bloodsucker! Trying to make it look like a bank robbery, is that it? Down with 'em, *pronto!*"

Instead of complying, Thorpe thrust his foot under the desk where it contacted an electric button. Outside, a gong began beating a loud alarm.

There was instantly the sound of running feet out in the street. They reached the door of the bank.

"Drop that gun, cowboy! And paw for the ceiling!"

With sneering triumph, Thorpe slowly lowered his hands. Patterson turned. He saw an irate storekeeper with a double-barreled shotgun leveled menacingly. The storekeeper blurted:

"Migawd, if it ain't young Patterson! Who'd ever of thought—"

A crowd was collecting rapidly behind him. The gong was still beating wildly. "Git the sheriff!" somebody shouted.

Patterson's gun hand relaxed unwillingly. His .45 dropped to the slab counter. He gritted in a low tone to Thorpe: "You can't get away with a loco play like this."

THORPE'S eyes dodged Patterson's. He said to the storekeeper with the shotgun: "Keep him covered, Smith. The bankers' association will reward you for this."

"You sure take it cool, Mr. Thorpe. He git anything?"

Thorpe shook his head. "Not yet." Then with quick afterthought he added: "Nothing, that is, except the ten thousand his thugs robbed me of yesterday. Down at Tecate."

"You're a liar!" snapped Patterson.

"Mebbe he come in tuh pay yuh back, Mr. Thorpe," drawled somebody in the crowd.

There was a guffaw of laughter. Then a red-faced man in a dusty black hat and a cowtail mustache pushed through the crowd and into the bank: "What's the ruckus—" he

began. Then his eyes widened. "Vance Patterson! How come?"

Thorpe spoke up. "He must have thought this town was a bunch of yahoos, Sheriff, to tackle a bank holdup."

"Thunderation, no!" blurted the sheriff. "Why, shucks, Thorpe, I knowed this boy's dad. I knowed his granddad afore that. And I knowed him since he was belly-high to a jacksnipe."

"Maybe you know he's busted, then," Thorpe fired back with growing confidence, "and that he's desperate for some money to save the Loop-E."

THE sheriff faced Van Patterson solemnly. "Is that the truth or is it a bunch of sassafras? And for Gawd sake, Thorpe, shet off that dang alarm."

Smith, the storekeeper, had edged up close, to miss none of the proceedings. His shotgun pointed to the floor. Patterson's .45 still lay on the slab counter. Perhaps he would never have thought of making the move he did had he not seen Thorpe's sleek hand reach out for it.

He whirled then and snatched the gun.

"Hold on, hold on!" yelped Hub Evans, the sheriff.

Patterson lunged out with a hard fist that caught the storekeeper on the whiskery chin. He went down like a tenpin. Patterson kicked his fallen shotgun across the floor, then spun around on the sheriff, who had his six-shooter half drawn.

"Drop it, Hub! I hate to do this to you but—"

One look in Vance Patterson's eyes, blued steel like a gun barrel, and Hub Evans let go his weapon. Patterson's .45 was fanning the crowd now.

"You all hollered holdup," he spat at them. "Well, you're going to get it. Up till now I've been playing my cards face up. But I'm through with that, savvy. Plumb through. Herd back there toward the vault, all of you. Start the procession, Hub."

"But good Godfrey, son, this just don't make sense."

"Get going! And you, Thorpe, open up that vault. Sudden, you hear?"

Cowed by the .45 and the blazing eyes behind it, the crowd began milling toward the vault. Thorpe hesitated. Patterson threw the .45 on him. There was a restlessness in Vance Patterson's trigger finger that made the banker spring into swift obedience.

Thorpe's trembling fingers manipulated the dials. The vault clicked open.

Patterson herded the dozen or more citizens and the protesting sheriff inside. Then the vault banged shut and the tumblers clicked.

CHAPTER IV

Border Justice

HIS eyes venomous, Thorpe faced Patterson. "You'll pay for this," he fumed.

Patterson holstered his gun. "Yeah, and I'll start paying now, Thorpe," he said grimly. He seized the banker by the coat lapels and swung him. Then, jolting the heel of his hand to the man's face, he knocked him into the chair.

While Thorpe was still gasping from this outrage, Vance Patterson stripped off his necktie and produced the wad of money from his chaps pocket. He threw Thorpe's head back, forcing his jaw open, he thrust the wad of currency between Thorpe's teeth, then completed the gag with the necktie.

With Thorpe's own belt he bound

the owner's hands back through the chair rungs. He worked fast. Other Los Gatos citizens might enter the bank at any moment.

"And now I reckon you're paid," Patterson said. He picked up a wire mesh waste basket and thrust it down over the terrified banker's head. "Just to get you accustomed to looking through bars," he said.

Then Patterson left the bank. He leaped to his saddle and rode at a run out of Los Gatos.

HE was headed for Campo now. The one anxiety left him was to learn how his major domo, Bill Stevens, was making out. He could sell the herd on the Mexican side for enough to pay off the Loop-E riders. Then he would head south, into Mexico. Behind him he would leave the Loop-E range and the poignant memories of three generations of Pattersons. To be sold to satisfy the law's debts.

The only thing that bit into his conscience was the thought of that tough old rooster, Hub Evans, who had wanted to be his friend.

Off across some fifteen miles of elfin forest of buck brush and manzanita, greasewood and cactus, lay Campo and the cattle pens. And the dipping chutes where the Loop-E herd would be turned back because its owner couldn't pay the customs.

It was around noon when Vance Patterson reached Campo. As his horse shuffled along the street, entering town at its tireless gait, a yell from a doorway halted him. It was young Masters. He was struggling with some exciting news.

"The *rurales,* boss! A squad of them, under Captain Pedro Dominguez, rode into town about an hour ago. And they're looking for you."

"Why?"

"For killing two men. Those breeds that stampeded the herd."

"Did you boys tell them about that affair in the cut-off canyon?"

"Hell, no!"

"Then how do they know I went gunning for those *hombres?*"

Masters made a grimace. "They brought that roan of yours in. Also the two carcasses. Came from down around Dos Lobos, Dominguez said. Look here, boss, if it's trouble just say the word and the outfit'll—"

"If trouble breaks, you men high-tail it over the line, savvy? But the important thing right now, how's Bill Stevens?"

"Him? Hell, boss, you couldn't kill that old maverick with one little bullet. No sir! The veterinary here patched him up and sent him to bed up at the Posada La Union and—"

Young Masters broke off with a hiss of warning. "Migosh, here comes Dominguez and his outfit now!"

Up by the *cuartel* at the head of the street, horsemen were pouring out of an arched gateway. With a final admonition to Masters to gather the Loop-E men together and make for the American side, Patterson wheeled and rode down the street at a dead run. He was aware, as the hot noon wind whistled past his ears, of a chorus of yells from Mexican throats and the thunder of hoofs pursuing him.

VANCE PATTERSON had not taken into account the speed of the Mexican "cactus telegraph" when Masters stopped him. A *peon* had seen and recognized him, and speedily relayed the word to the *rurales,* who were enjoying their midday *siesta* at the *cuartel.*

Patterson had no desire to languish in the *calabozo,* awaiting the slow processes of Mexican justice on a double murder charge. He was a fugitive now on both sides of the border. Fugitive and renegade. A bitter smile twisted his lips as he

leaned low over the saddle and spurred for the maze of twisting canyons to the south.

Dominguez and his olive-drag *rurales* followed stubbornly. They knew the ridge trails as well as Patterson.

High overhead two specks circled hopefully against the hot sky.

For the first few miles of going, Vance Patterson held his own with his pursuers. But frequent anxious glances back finally told him that they were gaining. Their horses were fresher than his own. In a long race that would be the deciding factor. His one chance was to reach the high piñon slopes, beyond Tecate; he might elude them there.

His horse began to falter and display signs of distress. Thirst. He needed water, or Patterson would never reach the piñon country.

They dipped into a small valley, but the stream bed was dry. Farther down, Patterson knew, was a small Mexican ranch and a windmill. He turned abruptly downstream, screening himself as best he could under a sparse growth of live oaks that rimmed the stream bed.

HE rode into the ranch, which was little more than a small clearing. There was a fenced field of corn, a *ramada* or dwelling made of mud and wattle, and under the windmill a watering trough made of a hollowed sycamore log.

Patterson dashed into the clearing and at the trough flung himself to the ground. The trough was half filled with tepid water. The horse thrust his muzzle into it to nostril depth. Patterson leaned over and they drank together.

The tiny *ranchita* had appeared deserted when Patterson came. But now a stealthy form appeared at a corner of the *ramada*. The man raised an old, badly-used .30-30 Winchester carbine and aimed at the back of the man at the trough. The carbine cracked—a flat report like the sudden flying up of a window-shade. A metal-jacketed bullet mushroomed into the trough, lancing the side of Patterson's face with splinters.

He straightened in a flash, his Colt in his hand. His would-be assassin dodged behind the *ramada*. The head of another man showed in the darkened doorway, across the sights of a six-shooter.

PATTERSON and this man in the house shot at the same time. Something clipped the flared edge of Patterson's chaps. A puff of dust jetted from the *ramada* wall, two inches over the head. There was a yell and a sombrero rolled out of the door.

Patterson ducked behind the watering trough, sighting around one end of it. He waited tensely as the seconds ticked off. What had become of that *hombre* with the carbine? He was the one to fear.

And where were the *rurales?* Perhaps he had lost them temporarily, back there where he had turned under the oaks.

The six-gun spoke again from the doorway. The bullet thudded into the trough and Patterson's horse danced away, snorting. Then came the dull crack of the .30-30 again, but not from the *ramada*. The other *ranchero* had ducked out into the brush and was circling so as to get at Patterson from the rear. He had no cover now.

The fellow with the carbine was shooting high. But his next shot was better. Something jolted Patterson's right leg. It crumpled under him. He felt his calf go numb, then a feeling of wetness inside his boot.

No use to hold out any longer. It seemed as though the entire world had turned against him. He had

made a long, hard fight of it, but the breaks were against him. He tossed his treasured .45 into the trough and raised both hands.

The *hombre* in the brush and the one lurking beyond the doorway rushed out simultaneously, with exultant shouts. As they ran up to Patterson, hugging his wounded leg against him to check the blood flow, they stopped and stared. Then the one with the carbine chattered:

"*Dios* is good, Juan! *Miri,* look! He has brought us our enemy. The *gringo* who killed *El Tigre* and Manuel."

PATTERSON, his teeth clamped hard together in throbbing pain, then recognized two of the natives who had loafed in the dorway of the *cantina* at Tecate and who had raised no hand to hinder the ten thousand dollar holdup.

They were an evil-looking pair. Vance Patterson knew their sort well. Border runners, rustlers. Murderers, even, when murder promised a profit. The *calabozo* at Campo was preferable to the mercy of these two *bravos.* The one with the carbine leered at him.

"The *senor* was in a hurry, no? *Porque?*"

"Teaching the *rurales* to ride, fool."

"Ah, you hear, Juan? The *rurales.* We must save the so-amiable *senor* from the *rurales.* Quick, Juan, his horse! Hide it in the chaparral. Come with me, *senor,* to the *ramada.*"

The *bravo* hoisted Patterson to his feet and hurried him to the crude shelter. Patterson sat on the earthen floor and pulled the boot off his wounded leg. Just a bullet groove, he was glad to see. No artery touched. Luck was with him in a few matters.

The one called Juan burst into the *ramada,* panting. "The *caballo,* it is well hid. They are coming now. Dominguez and his men."

The troopers stormed into the clearing. The man with the carbine darted outside in answer to a hail in Spanish. A rapid conversation followed.

"The *gringo* killer, *El Capitan? Si,* he rode this way. Fired on me as he passed. Look, the holes in my poor watering trough. *Si, si,* he rode on to the south. God with you, *Senor El Capitan,* and your brave men."

Patterson, appalled at the situation, took a breath to shout out his presence. Juan, watching him hawk-like, picked up a knife and thrust the point against the prisoner's throat.

"One word, *senor,*" he warned in a hoarse whisper, "and—" He completed the threat with a clucking noise of his tongue.

The *rurales* rode on. When their hoofbeats dimmed in the distance, the *bravo* with the carbine re-entered the *ramada.* His eyes smoldered with avarice as he confronted Patterson.

"AND now, *senor,* to repay us for our poor hospitality—where is the money you took from *El Tigre* and Manuel?"

"So that's the game you're playing? Well, I haven't got it."

"You do not quite answer my question, *senor.* Perhaps one may be persuaded, no?"

In a corner of the *ramada* a soaked cowhide was stretched on a frame. One of the *bravos* had begun the process of making it into a *riata.* The hide was partly cut in a long, continuous thong, around its outer edges toward the center, in such a manner as an apple is peeled. The thong, as it was cut, was buried in a pile of wet ashes. The lye in the ash loosened the hair.

"The knife, Juan."

The other produced the weapon

he had held at Patterson's throat. Patterson stiffened. "You touch me with that blade, *tonto*, and you'll die for it."

The *bravo* smiled suavely. "Ah, *senor*, there are better ways than the knife to make a man talk." He stooped and picked up the coil of rawhide from the wet ash. With an order to Juan, the two of them pounced on Patterson. He struggled fiercely, but they overcame him. In a few moments the rawhide strip was wrapped many times around his body.

His arms were trussed closely to his sides.

"And now, Juan, we will tie the *senor* outside, to a *ramada* post. The sun will do the rest. In a very short while, he will be ready to talk, I promise."

CHAPTER V

Torture

WHEN the two *bravos* lashed him against the post, the thonged rawhide was wrapped tightly. But before many minutes passed, Vance Patterson felt its remorseless grip increasing, like the coils of a boa constrictor.

It was the work of the blazing sun, shrinking the hide. Before long, in an hour at most, he knew that the endless wrapping would shrink, cutting deep into his body. Squeezing like a hangman's noose until the pressure could be borne no longer.

The two *bravos* sat in the doorway, rolling cigarettes and watching calmly. It was a part of their cunning to address no word to him. They were confident that the American soon would be ready to disclose the whereabouts of the ten thousand dollars. This inhuman trick was an old one with border cutthroats. It never failed.

The dry air drew the knotted thong tighter. Patterson's breath came in agonized gasps. Already the walls of his chest seemed about to collapse. He knew that his captors were waiting to hear his first groaned pleas for mercy. He clenched his teeth and bore the ordeal in silence.

HELPLESS as a mummy, he stared at the clotting wound in his leg. It was numb now. The pain like a closing vise around his heart drove the throbbing ache from his wound. He threw back his head, eyes turned toward the sky. Two distant specks circled hungrily.

The *bravo* with the carbine was growing restless. Never before had he known a victim to withstand for so long the torture of the shrinking rawhide. He spoke to Juan:

"The horse, you had best bring it here."

"But the *rurales* may return, *quien sabe?*"

"Do as I say, stupid one."

Juan ground out a cigarette under a booted heel and departed. When he was out of earshot, the other leaned toward Patterson.

"Come, *senor*, a word between us. Tell me where to find the *dinero*. We will share it, no? As for this Juan—" The traitorous one drew back the hammer of the carbine. It clicked suggestively.

Patterson made no sign that he had heard. His guard's eyes glowed with wrath.

"Stubborn fool! Speak quickly, before it is too late."

A desperate plan was forming in Vance Patterson's reeling brain. He knew that if he told that Thorpe's ten thousand was safe in Thorpe's bank at Los Gatos, he would be killed anyway. In a frenzy of disappointment the *bravo* would mur-

der him. By moving his back against the *ramada* post, he had found that it was planted loosely in the earth. It carried only the weight of loose-thatched brush overhead. If he tried this plan, he must act soon. While he still had strength.

"You will tell?" breathed the man in the doorway.

Patterson nodded.

"Bueno!"

Juan was returning astride Patterson's horse. The traitorous one raised the carbine, sighted quickly, and fired. Juan's sombrero leaped from his head. He sat grotesquely erect for an instant in the saddle, then toppled stiffly.

The horse bolted. Juan, suspended limply from a stirrup, trailed in the dust for a few yards. Then the body thumped to the ground and lay still.

The horse, head up and mane flying, nickered wildly and set off in pursuit of the *rurales*.

The *bravo* in the doorway snarled an oath and raised his gun again. He had not reckoned on this possibility. The *rurales* would quickly back-trail Patterson's horse to the *ranchita*.

BUT before he could shoot, Patterson doubled his legs under him and heaved upward with all his strength. The *ramada* pole lifted from the ground. The dry thatch overhead crackled as it tore loose. Throwing himself forward then, Patterson brought the pole down, aimed at his enemy's head.

The *bravo* ducked, but not soon enough. The pole thudded onto his shoulder. A bone crunched under it and with a yell he dropped the carbine.

He staggered to his feet, one arm dangling loosely. Patterson, now on his hands and knees, swung his body sidewise. The pole swept at the *bravo*, but he stumbled back just as it grazed past him.

It was a weird contest. Patterson, with his Atlas-like burden, hands bound and one leg barely able to sustain his weight, was matched against the killing fury of the man with the fractured shoulder. And the object of their struggle now was the fallen carbine; the *bravo* to regain it, Paterson to prevent him.

STAGGERING forward, Patterson attempted to ram his enemy. The *bravo* sidestepped, clasping the pole and giving it a trust that sent the human battering ram at the other end spinning. Then the man made a dive for the .30-30.

He got it in his one good hand. He clasped the butt between his knees to eject the empty shell in the chamber. He forced back the lever action successfully, and threw in a loaded cartridge from the magazine. He raised the cocked and loaded Winchester just as Patterson, continuing the spin, brought the pole against the side of the *bravo's* head.

There was such force to the blow that the pole shattered. The *bravo* pitched down, his face grinding in earth. Patterson toppled. His breath was coming in wheezing, failing gasps as he braced the shattered remnant of the pole on the ground and wrenched it loose from the rawhide thongs. The thongs mercifully loosened.

Then he collapsed on his back. The sky turned black as his consciousness departed.

The next that Vance Patterson knew, someone was bending over him, pouring water over his face. In the background was a babble of talk in Spanish and the champing of restless horses. He took a deep breath, blinked, then forced himself to a sitting position for a final struggle.

El Capitan Pedro Dominguez,

darkly handsome, knelt beside him. He smiled and laid a hand on Patterson's shoulder. "Easy, *amigo.* You will feel better in wan minute or two. Right now, eet is like a bull you feel, no? After the bullfight."

Patterson wiped his dripping face with a tattered sleeve. "This is a devil of a time for funny remarks, Dominguez," he remarked.

"Wan devil of a day for funny things to happen, too, my friend. I was amaze when my men caught that horse of yours. For the second time without you on it."

"So then you turned back and got me?"

"*Si,* just so."

Vance Patterson swayed to his feet. "Well, here I am, Dominguez. I give up. Let's start back. To Campo and the *calabozo.*"

"*Calabozo?* Who say anytheeng about a *calabozo?*" The *rurales* leader threw back his head and laughed heartily. "So *senor,* that ees why you lead us so long a chase, no? You theenk it was for to arrest you, eh?"

Patterson's head was whirling. "Well, what else?" he managed to say unsteadily.

"Listen, *Senor* Patterson." Again Dominguez clamped a hand on the American's shoulder. "I have not come for to arrest you, for keeling *El Tigre.* No! I have come to reward you."

"Wh-what? Reward me? How come?"

"*El Tigre* was a criminal, my friend. A vair' bad man who killed a *jefe de politico* in Sonora. Mexico City has offered wan beeg reward for his capture, dead or alive. *Mucho pesos.*"

"Then—then—" Patterson's steel nerves were beginning to feel the incessant strain of the twenty-four trouble-filled hours.

"So! You are wan beeg hero, *Senor* Patterson. The governair he send the money. And I, Pedro Dominguez, thank you t'rough the bottom of my heart."

Vance Patterson saw one of the *rurales* holding his horse. New strength surged mysteriously within him. He hobbled for it.

"Come on, then, Dominguez. The herd. Campo."

El Capitan Pedro Dominguez enjoyed another laugh.

"Wot, you forget your boot, no?" He leaned from the saddle and picked up the piece of footgear from in front of the *ramada.* But when he straightened, Vance Patterson had swung into the saddle. He paused a moment, gazing heavenwards with a silent, grateful face.

No wheeling, watching birds of prey remained. Far off, toward the mountain rim in the south, two gorged and satisfied omens of desert evil were vanishing in the far off haze.

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Will swap books, dime novels, stamps, approval sheets, covers, knife, ink, album, sheets of stamps, 12,000 word dictionary, biblical books, for? Boyette, 1618 A Street, Portsmouth, Va.

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Will swap Crossley six tube battery radio, polished horns hat racks on carved panels, complete course on psychology, for typewriter, cartoon course, or what have you. John A. Sanchez, Colmor, New Mexico.

Have 9.5mm Pathex camera, projector and equipment, and 5 x 8 model printing press with 8 fonts of type and equipment. Will swap for 16mm. motor projector or valve trombone W. R. Dolbier, 211 Hillside Road, Elizabeth, New Jersey.

Have 20 volumes books of knowledge. Old Ironsides and first day covers. Trade for typewriter or what have you. A. C. Junkley, 4549 So. Puget Sound, Washington.

Have steel rod and Shakespeare reel, telephone generator, arrowheads, want radio course or? Harold Godfrey, Comanche, Texas, Route 2.

Have La Salle traffic management course. Will exchange for radio or photographic supplies, or what? Walter S. Miller, 248 Franklin Lane, Ventura, Calif.

Opals, turquoises, garnets, old photos of west, coins, stamps, minerals, beadwork, arrowheads, spears, books, moss agates, fossils. What have you? Vernon Lemley, Northbranch, Kansas.

Have accordion, slingerlands, violin course, Indian antiques. Want Edison cylinder phonograph, table model, piano accordion, or good tenor banjo. Marion M. Shaw, West Blucton, Ala. Route 1.

Have stamps, fishing poles and reel, detective and aviation books, Indian head pennies, foreign coins. Want photography equipment, stamps or what have you. J. Berger, 910 Dinsmore Avenue, Far Rockaway, New York.

Have 16 Watt dynamo-motor output 8 volts 2 amperes. Good condition. Will exchange for guitar or mandolin. Paul Balawick, 129 Grand Street, Brooklyn, New York.

Indian chief motorcycle parts, frames, forks, transmissions, motor parts, etc. Swap for single cylinder air cooled gas engine. Harold Thompson, 15821 Kentucky Avenue, Detroit, Michigan.

Have oil paintings, sign painters letter patterns. Want musical instruments, relics. John Hayes, Doe Run, Missouri.

Have foreign and U. S. post marks, match covers, post cards, and stamps. Also precancels and U. S. in blocks. Want first day covers. L. H. Oakes, Jr., 515 10½ Street, Parkersburgh, West Va.

Want U. S. mint stamps mostly commemoratives. Will give in exchange fine foreign stamps from my high grade approval sheets. Robert Kostillo, Benwood, W. Va.

Have 25 valuable formulas for autos and household. Want five one dollar Columbian stamps, 1845. St. Louis five cent black stamp. Roy West, Shubata, Miss.

Have violin in good condition. Will trade for a pair of cowboy chaps. Write Kenn Allen Salida, Colorado, Route 1, c/o A. Unterfelder.

Will trade one foreign envelope for each Liberty Head nickel received or two foreign stamps for each U. S. precancel from the West. Lady Maurine Archer, Box 2, Spearman, Texas.

Have stamps to swap for Indian arrowheads and other relics, also one complete set of *The Spectator* published in 1810 by Johnson and Warner. What have you? L. L. Greene, Box 6, Pacolet Mills, S. C.

Have cartoonist course, books, drawing table, radio parts, other things. Want telescope, books, blowtorch, mechanic's tools, or anything useful. Ray Hudston, Arlington, Ky.

Will swap 100 different U. S. stamps, commemoratives and foreign for 75 different precancels, or five old Indian head pennies for 75 precancels. M. E. Hurley, 3012 Windsor Avenue, Baltimore, Maryland.

Have three tube battery radio, steel traps, apollo electric torch, books. Want U. S. school course for violin or gutar. Mel Sharer, 502 Summit Street, Gallitain, Pa.

Have ice skates, books, postcards. Want old paper catalogs, certificates, deeds, maps, pictures, prints, or? John Kapsak, Sellersville, Pa.

Have complete Farmer Burns and Frank Botch wrestling and physical culture course. Also complete Heighth Increasing course (Stebbing's). What am I offered. David Gulley, Winchester, Ind.

One Jump Ahead

A bullet whistling its death song, whined dangerously close to Danny's head

When Danny McClellan Hit the Trail to Arrowhead Valley, He Didn't Know He'd Travel to the Sound of a Barking Six-Gun!

By JACKSON COLE

Author of "Raiders of Pecos Valley," "Gun Law," etc.

THE Red Ripper, breath whistling through his flaring nostrils, white-ringed eyes like fiery agates, trembled for an instant under the weight of the rider as the blindfold was jerked off.

Then, humping his back until the saddle leather creaked from the strain of the cinch, he leaped, twisting and bellowing his defiant rage, high into the air and halfway across the round corral.

That first sunfishing jump, augmented by a wicked "hitch" in the bay's powerful shoulders, loosened the rider who tried desperately to regain his balance.

But the Red Ripper, jarring the

earth with legs as rigid as stilts, was weaving up through space on the second jump, higher, more crooked than the first.

The swaying, overbalanced lad in the saddle went for leather, missed the sky-rocketing saddle horn—and raked the cantle with a spur rowel as he was hurled hard to the ground.

Danny McClellan, standing just outside the corral gate, jerked it open and grabbed the outflung arm of the thrown rider. But already the Red Ripper, pivoting on his hind legs and trumpeting his wrath, lashed at his victim with flying forefeet.

Before Danny could drag the fallen man out of danger's way, the merciless hoofs found their mark—barely grazing Danny's own head—and dealt death to the luckless rider.

Jim Darnell, the owner of the Cow Creek outfit, had leaped down from his perch on the top corral pole, rushing to Danny's assistance. He bent over the motionless body, saw he was too late, then rose slowly to glare at the snorting animal trotting around the corral.

"Confound your bay hide!" he growled. "You're only half horse—and half wolf. So that's why you're called the Red Ripper, eh? Throw 'em—then kill 'em!" He turned a tense face to another puncher who had just climbed down from the corral fence. "Give me your gun, Andy. I'm goin' to see that Red Ripper don't kill no more men!"

"HOLD on a minute, Mr. Darnell." The speaker, a big man with dull, slate-grey eyes, swung down from his saddle.

"Who are you?" Darnell demanded, slightly surprised. He had been too intent on other things to notice the stranger who had ridden up.

"I'm Bart Lodeen," the man replied. "Own the Circle Bar outfit up in Arrowhead Valley."

"Quite a ways from home, ain't you?" Darnell asked. He shook his head slowly as he watched a couple of his punchers bearing the limp body of the Cow Creek bronc twister toward the bunkhouse.

"Yeh," the stranger answered. "Got short on saddle horses and come down here to buy up a bunch of likely-lookin' young broncs." He pointed across the creek. "That's them. I'm hazin' home. And that's why I didn't want to see you kill that bay in the corral there. He's a purty cayuse. I'll buy him from you."

"After seein' what he done?" Darnell was incredulous.

"Sure. I can take that outta him."

"I'D rather shoot him," the cattleman answered. "Still, if you want him, take him. You can have him, but get him outta this country."

"Much obliged," Lodeen said, grinning.

Danny McClellan, who had been listening, now advanced.

"Say, Mr. Lodeen," he began, "I'm headin' for Arrowhead Valley, too. I stopped here over night, and was just gettin' ready to ride on. I thought maybe that—"

"That you'd like a job helpin' me haze them ridge runners along north?" Lodeen eyed the tall, freckle-faced youth keenly. "What you headin' fer Arrowhead fer?"

"To see my Uncle Owen. Maybe you know him. They call him Moccasin Mac up there."

Lodeen gave a little start. He hesitated, then spoke slowly.

"Yeh, I know him, all right," he said. "But I didn't know he had any relations."

Young Danny smiled.

"Guess I'm the only one he's got left. He's been writin' me to come up."

"He knows you're comin', does he?"

"Nope. I'm goin' to bust in on him and surprise him."

"I see." A twisted smile was partly visible under Bart Lodeen's drooping

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mustache. "Well, I guess you can trail along north with me. Go git your horse, young feller, while I git somebody to help me yank the saddle off'n that bay."

All day long Danny rode beside Lodeen in the dusty wake of the small bunch of horses. Once the youth had inquired of his companion the reason for his wanting the Red Ripper who, his bay hide glistening in the sunlight, maintained a swift trot at the head of the band.

But Lodeen evaded the question. To him it was "plumb crazy" to shoot a good horse, like Darnell was going to, merely because the bay had "throwed and tromped on some would-be bronc fighter."

Danny was in favor of less speed. His sorrel horse, Turk, was sweating too much. But Lodeen, laughing at the lad whenever he slowed down, only roweled his big grey the harder.

The sound of hurrying hoofs drummed across miles of grassy sod, splashed through shallow streams and clicked against the rocky surface of waste places. The sun was low above the western horizon when, after an arduous climb of a half-mile, the bunch of weary horses topped the high table-land, scarred with deep, rocky ravines, that marked the southern boundary of Arrowhead Valley.

It was impossible to make speed over this rough going, so the two men were walking their horses side by side when Lodeen remarked:

"Well, there lays Arrowhead Valley, young feller. Reckon you'll be right glad to meet up with your uncle."

"I sure will!" Danny answered, eagerly. "That's sure a purty spot—that Valley. No wonder Uncle Mac likes it. I'd like to go on livin' down there myself. And if things turn out the way I hope they will, I'll do it."

"Yeh?" Lodeen glanced quickly from the corner of his eye. "Say,

(Continued on page 118)

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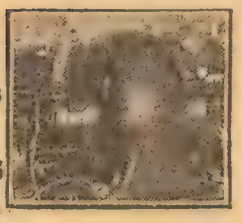

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(Continued from page 116)

ain't that a new gun you're packin' there, feller?" Danny nodded.

"Yep, and it set me back darn near a month's wages, too."

"Hm-m! Let's have a look at it, will you?"

"Sure." Danny pulled the new .45 from its holster and handed it over.

As Lodeen, with a peculiar expression on his face, began to inspect the weapon, the Red Ripper, still in the lead of the bunch of horses—and ever seeking an opportunity to break away from his hated enemy, man—broke off the trail and down the steep side-hill of a ravine.

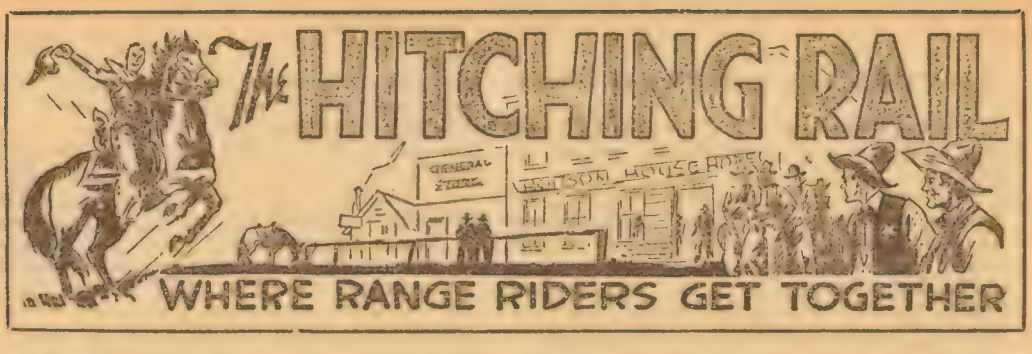
"I'll turn 'em," Danny announced, touching the spurs to his sorrel.

As he swerved diagonally down the steep embankment, his horse stumbled, causing the rider to be thrown forward in his saddle. That stumble probably saved Danny's life; for, at the same instant, the gun in Bart Lodeen's hand roared—and a bullet, whistling its death song, whined dangerously close to Danny's hat brim.

The lad, twisting in his saddle, and getting a glimpse of Lodeen taking aim again, spurred his startled sorrel down the precipitous grade and dodged through a clump of gnarled cedars. It was a dangerous race, with death as a penalty for one false step, that Danny McClellan was running. And when he reached the narrow bottom of the tortuous ravine, the going was hazarded with jutting boulders, tangled mahogany brush and storm-washed gulches.

Behind him, and raining a hail of lead around him, thundered Bart Lodeen on his big grey. Although Danny didn't know why, he realized that Lodeen had betrayed him with the treachery of a slinking coyote—and that, having exposed his hand, he dared not let him escape. But Danny wasn't concerned with reasons for his

(Continued on page 121)



WELL, well, folks, I'm back and r'arin' tuh go! What a Fall vacation! Did I hev a swell time, ev'rybody? Say, I'll tell th' cock-eyed ol' world—an' then some.

Boss romped over tuh my desk a few weeks ago, squinted like he allers does, eyed my red flannels ag'in an' then throwed down his dictum—funny word, but thet's whut he called it.

"Buck," he says, "yuh got a holiday. Too much of this city life is bad fer yuh. I want yuh tuh go back west fer a few weeks an' sorta gather up more of th' real atmosphere. Yere's a ticket readin' straight down tuh yore durned ol' wild hoss country—an' a return trip. Git back on time, an' try not tuh bust yore fool neck. We still need yuh, even in them red flannels an' them ear-muffs yuh wears when yuh goes out tuh lunch!"

A Mile a Minit

I glimpsed that ticket, long's yore arm both ways, an' did I grab fer my ol' Stetson an' give it a poke? Jest ast me, rannihans an' ranniladies. Left th' Penn depot nine thet night, a sittin' in one o' them observation cyars yuh reads about got all that red an' green plush everywheres, a porter in white, nickel-plated spittoons stuck under yore laigs, big winders like they war th' front o' one o' them department stores, lotsa magazines; ours showin' fine among th' rest. Cities went bangin' past us like we war goin' a mile a minit.

Got me sorta dizzy, watchin' fer th' next one. But I hung ontuh that dictum like all hell, itchin' tuh see El Paso, mebbe with Jess Taylor, Dude Chaney, Lod Littleton, John Park, Jimmy McDonald, an' also ol' Bob Crosby, Hugh Strickland, Bob Boyce, all saddle pounders (but no leather grabbers) standin' 'round th' depot tuh toot me home.

Ropes A-Whirlin'

I sorta visioned herds o' cows, rompin' broncs, gals in big Stetsons an' sittin' pretty on sorrels an' bays an' witeys an' blue roans—mebbe even one on a real palomina. Ropes a-whirlin' high, bands playin'.

Warn't nuthin' I didn't vision thataway, fer I war goin' back home, whar war writ them old songs o' th' range, which I'd shore hear ag'in—"Bury me not on th' lone perarie!" "Li'l Wrangler Joe!" An' my ol' laigs fork broncs like I war still a star rodeo performer. I sat thinkin' mebbe I'd try me 'nother round o' bulldoggin'—ef they didn't lug up too big a one. Some o' my j'ints ain't whut they usta be, durn 'em!

All Tuh th' Good

Well, folks, I had ev'rything, jest fine. Th' boys an' girls hugged me fit tuh bust my ribs. Them ol' broncs seemed jest expectin' I'd be thar, an' they acted joyous, but I didn't grab no leather—no, sir, not one time. An' they brung up right good steers fer our bulldoggin', too. Jess Taylor, he managed that. An' I found I war still all tuh th' good—bar none.

Dust, desert, sandstorms, some durned chilly nights on th' range, one trail drive o' some yearlin's, lotta swell *bailes;* an' did I hug th' gals I'd knowed all my life, married or single? Why ast me, fellas.

That dictum o' th' boss' has been great, folks, fer I got a lotta fresh thoughts 'bout th' range an' th' big hearts o' them what busts th' wind on sun-fishin' broncs. So, let's go!

Now that I'm back th' first thing I want tuh do is let yuh all read a couple of mighty interestin' letters from th' two writin' rannies what gave us two of them excitin' yarns in this issue. Th' first one is from Russell Bankson, an' hyer's what he's got tuh say 'bout how he come tuh write ROARIN' SIX-GUNS:

Dear Boss:

I'm shore mighty proud to be ridin' on this here roundup with yuh, along with all them other top-hands yuh got corralled on the table of contents page.

An' seein' as how this here's my first job with yuh, I reckoned as how it might be seemin' on my part t' step up an' give all yuh're buckaroos a inter—intraduk—aw, heck!—a plain ol' knock-

down t' this here young Gard Runyan friend o' mine.

Yuh see, I can vouch fer him bein' a all 'round two-fisted, two-gun, bronco-bustin' son o' the West.

The way it come about that I an' him are bunkies, is this. I am driftin' down through the Central Oregon range country this summer, on my black an' white pinto, lookin' fer a good spread t' sign on with. I am four days out from Burns, with the thermometer standin' at a hundred an' twenty in the shade, if they was enny such thing within two hundred miles, an' my tongue is hangin' down so's it touches my Adam's apple, when I rides smack int' a scene that gives me pause t' wonder.

We are out in the badlands where the alkali potholes is twenty miles apart. But here yuh can see where they has been a ol' river bed which ain't had no water in it fer mebbe a million year. But jes' the same, all along that old course they is *hombres* diggin' holes down t' bedrock. An' when I makes inquiries I finds that they have found placer gold in that ol' vanishing river bed. Yessir, it's been a gold stream sometime!

They was a lot said in the newspapers 'bout that there strike, which was follered by a reg'lar stampede in there. Reckon most o' yuh buckaroos musta heard 'bout it.

Ennyhow, right from that I commences t' git ROARING SIX-GUNS. An' say, I'm tellin' yuh that the further I went, the more excitin' it got.

They was some rip-roarin' times in there, yuh can bet, with gun-play an' men standin' guard over their claims, an' ranchers organizin' t' keep the tenderfoots from swarmin' over their range so thick they wasn't no room left fer the stock t' graze.

As you'll see by the story which I have writ, this here young Gard Runyan worked it round so's everything come out all right in the end, though.

Now, Boss, as I said before, I shore like yuhr spread, an' I hope yuh're gonna step right up an' as't me t' turn my black an' white pinto int' the home corral an' stick my legs under yuhr mess table, with all them other fast-ridin' buckaroos yuh got signed on fer top hands.

S'long,
RUSSELL A. BANKSON.

Shore, we always got plenty o' room fer top hand writers, an' nothin' else but jest that. An' now Syl MacDowell rises tuh make a few remarks 'bout his bang-up yarn BORDER BULLETS. Lend an' ear:

Howdy, Mister Editor:

Well, sir, I pawed dust quite a spell after getting your letter asking me the how-come of that yarn, BORDER BULLETS. Writing a story about imaginary folks and make-believe places is one thing. But making a side-talk about friends and neighbors and the country this *hombre* calls home, that's something else. As the dog said when he chased after a rabbit and caught up with a bob-cat.

I hope I didn't bust one of your rules when I wrote that story about sure-enough folks. Can't quite savvy, myownself, why I up and did it.

Maybe it's because a lot of people never hear about that part of our southern border which separates California from the Mexican State of Lower California. Like I said in the story, there's no Rio Grande along here to make it stand out prominent in the geography books. Just an imaginary line that runs through a wilderness of desert and mountains from the Colorado River, near Yuma, to Tiajuana on the coast. It's cow country, most of it. North of that line is a pretty well settled land. South of it lies the last frontier. Lower California is plum wild. It's wild, even, for Mexico, because it's Mexico's farthest-off province, like Alaska is to the United States, sort of.

It'll be right bad news next time I drop in the Tecate *cantina*, I reckon, and find out that the bartender reads THRILLING WESTERN. He'll say: "So, *amigo*, you stage wan magazine hold-up in my place, eh? An' you say my table tops, they are sticky, yes? *Dios*, wot a long tongue you haff, *senor!* Spleet bo' ways in the middle, like a magpie! Make peeple theenk Tecate is toff, eh?"

And I'll say: "You got me all wrong, Manuel. You run a swell dump and I bet you ain't had a fight in here since last Saturday. And nearly a year since that range war over beyond Jacumba, in which eight riders got killed prompt and permanent. You better give me credit for this much—I didn't make all the villains Mexicanos, did I? No, you're doggone right I didn't They're halfbreeds, that's what! You can pick out for your ownself which side they got their cussedness from! Quick, Manuel, the *habanero!*" I'm hoping he'll forgive, then, and slide out a drink.

I'm telling you, Mister Editor, it's going to be hell to have characters pop up out of a story and raise objections like that. Every buckaroo from Palomar Mountain to the *Ojas Negros* will figure I was thinking of him in calling that Loop E character Vance Patterson. Fact is, Patterson is made up out of three different flesh-and-blood gents. If it comes to the worst, I'll say who and they can fight it out among their ownselves, how's that?

You don't happen to want any stories about Timbuctoo or Australia or the Argentine, do you, Mister Editor? Let me know if you can use such. I never been to any of those places so maybe I'll be safer in writing about them.

Yours sorrowfully,
SYL MACDOWELL.

P. S.—My worst mistake was to make Thorpe, the banker, the main villain. So no use sending me a check for that yarn. I won't be able to get it cashed in these parts!

Both of them letters are shore mighty interestin'. An' now I guess I'd better be lookin' through th' rest o' th' mail. Here's one from Billy Hale, San Francisco, Californy. He's shore got a funny way spellin' Californy, folks. End it with a "ia", like it war all dressed up. Me, I likes things plain.

Billy asks 'bout some western cow

(Continued on page 126)

ONE JUMP AHEAD

(Continued from page 118)

betrayer's act as he was in getting beyond the range of his assailant's guns.

Bending low over the hull of his saddle, he urged the rangy sorrel to do his best—and swore at himself for having trusted, and handed his gun over to, Bart Lodeen. Hope leaped to the young man's blue eyes as he saw the confining walls of the deep ravine widen. Beyond lay the rolling range of Arrowhead Valley.

With the jeopardy of falls removed, Danny reasoned now that his race for life would develop into a contest of speed between his sorrel and Lodeen's bloody-flanked grey.

It was a gruelling race for the next two miles, with Lodeen's bullets pelting spitefully into the dust behind the fleet-footed sorrel which, slowly but surely, was gaining on the heaving grey.

Then Danny, a stranger to the country over which he was racing, suddenly brought his horse to a sliding stop. The "hill" over which he was riding had turned out to be a twenty-foot rimrock. At the base of it swirled the seething water of Rusty Creek.

But the pursued man hesitated for only a second. A slug of hot lead zipping past his cheek decided for him what choice he must make between the probable death ahead and the certain death from behind.

There was no retreat now. Lodeen, bent on murder, was too close.

The reluctant sorrel cringed to the touch of the spurs on his heaving sides, trembled for an instant. Then, leaping far out to clear the bulging face of the twenty-foot embankment, the animal plunged gamely into the deep, turbulent stream below.

There was a mighty splash, a long, breath-taking moment as both horse and rider broke under the water's sur-

(Continued on page 122)

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Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and County aforesaid, personally appeared H. L. Herbert, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the business manager of THRILLING WESTERN and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication, for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business manager are:

Publisher, Better Publications, Inc., 570 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; Editor, G. B. Farnum, 570 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; Managing Editor, none; Business Manager, H. L. Herbert.

2. That the owner is: Better Publications, Inc., 570 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.; N. L. Pines, 570 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: none.

4. That the two paragraphs next above giving the names of owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company, but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustees or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustees is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statement embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders, who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest, direct or indirect, in the said stock, bonds or other securities than as so stated by him.

H. L. HERBERT.

Sworn and subscribed to before me this 28th day of September, 1934. Adrea Goldberg, Notary Public, N. Y. Co. Clks No. 416, Reg. No. 6, G 587. Commission expires March 30, 1936.

(Continued from page 121)

face to battle with the force of the current. But when, at last, both reappeared, Danny swerved the sorrel back toward the rim-rock over which they had plunged.

It was too far to swim across the wide stream, especially with Bart Lodeen, his exultant yells already rising, shooting at a helpless man battling for his life.

Slipping from the saddle under the protruding rim-rock, Danny led his dripping horse up on a narrow strip of sand bar. Crouching close against the rocky wall, he heard a thick voice yelling above the noise of the stream.

"Drowned!" I knowed he would be!"

Danny, cold as he was, grinned as he stroked the neck of his sorrel.

"Mr. Lodeen's wrong, Turk," he whispered. "But we won't go up and argue the point with him. Not while he's got two guns and we ain't got any."

For a long time Danny huddled against the cold, rock wall. It was nearly dark when, at last, he ventured to swing on to the sorrel and ride downstream, sometimes in water up to the saddle skirts, until he found a place where his horse could get over a low embankment.

Far away a distant light twinkled. Toward it Danny rode, allowing his worn mount to walk leisurely along.

It was nearly noon the following day when Danny McClellan, who had spent the night with a passing freight outfit, rode up to his Uncle Mac's little ranch on the head of Paint Creek. The young man had made a wide detour around the big outfit on lower Paint Creek; for that, he had been informed, was the Circle Bar, owned by Bart Lodeen.

Danny, making that detour, had promised himself that, once he could borrow a gun from his Uncle Mac, he wouldn't avoid the Circle Bar. In

(Continued on page 124)

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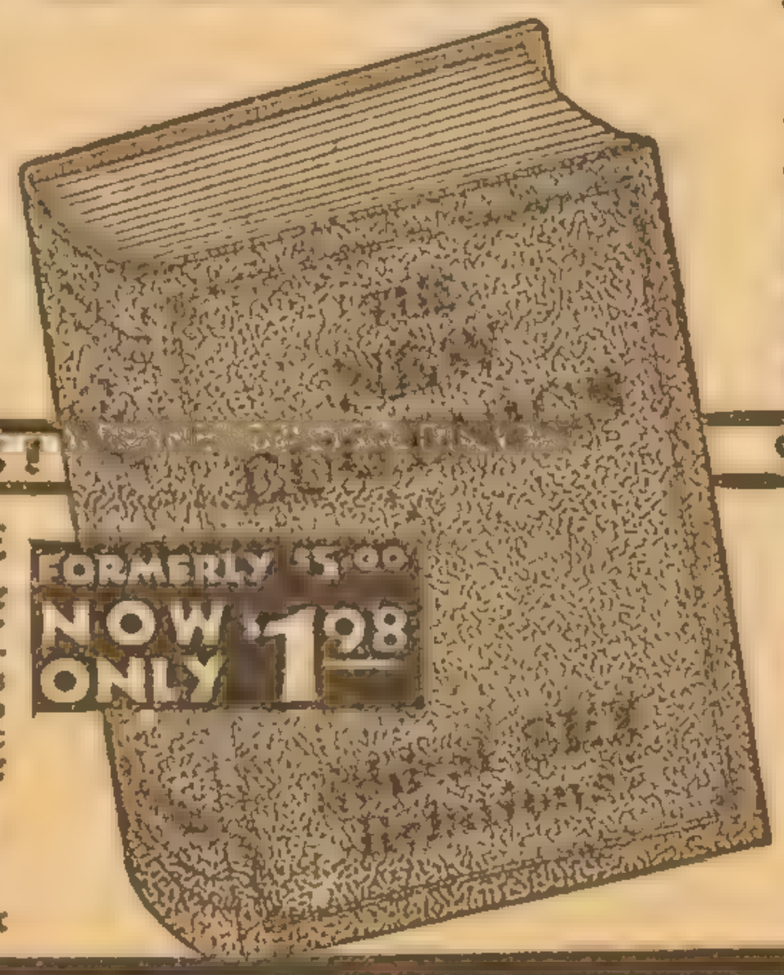

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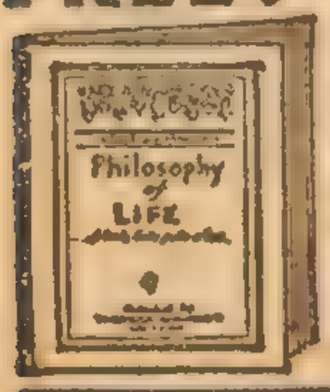

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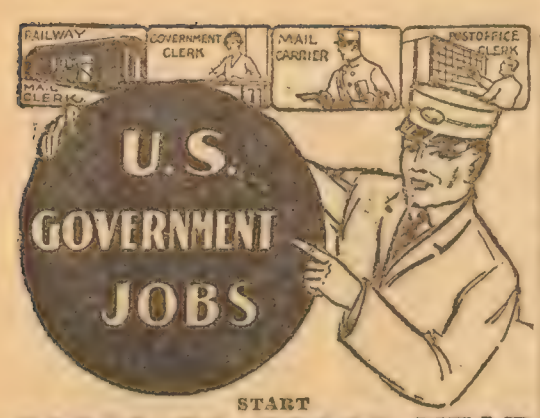

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(Continued from page 122)

fact, he would ride straight for it—and look up Bart Lodeen.

As he rounded the bend below the ranch buildings, the youthful rider saw dust rising from his uncle's corrals. Then, recognizing a certain burly figure outside the pole fence, Danny emitted a sharp "Huh!" and quickly reined his sorrel into the trees fringing the creek bank.

Now, screened from view, and with a smouldering hostility in his blue eyes, he rode upstream. Unobserved, he slid from his saddle and ducked inside the low, log cabin.

From a cartridge belt suspended on the wall, he pulled a six-shooter, hastily examined the cylinder. Then he started toward the corrals, his gaze glued on the back of Bart Lodeen who was leaning against the fence, his back toward the cabin.

Then Danny's attention shifted abruptly. Inside the corral was the flashing bay hide of the Red Ripper, making his first wicked jump—and with a small, middle-aged man in the saddle.

Stifling the cry of warning that rose to his tense throat, Danny rushed forward. But already the bay outlaw had thrown his rider. Now he was wheeling on his hind feet, as he had wheeled yesterday, to kill a man.

It was then that Danny, throwing his gun into action, blazed away.

The bay killer squealed, pawed the air with flying hoofs, and toppled over to the ground beside the man intended for his victim.

With the startling crack of Danny's gun, Bart Lodeen whirled, reaching for his own six-shooter. For a split second he stared, dumbfounded, at the face of the youth confronting him. "You!" he rasped.

"Yeh—me!" Danny replied, coolly. "Well, why don't you yank *my* gun outta your holster, you two-legged coyote, and start shootin'?"

Cornered, goaded by those accusing eyes, Lodeen "yanked" with trem-

bling fingers, only to feel the jar of Danny's bullet spinning the gun from his hand. The big man, uttering a roar, leaped at his opponent. But Danny, cool, and light on his feet, sidestepped quickly, slapped the big man across the side of the head with his gun barrel and watched him slump down against the corral fence.

"Lordy, kid!" said a weak voice of the thrown rider who, by this time, had risen to his feet. "I thought I was a goner when I seen that red devil's hoofs pawin' up over me!"

Danny said: "What are you callin' me 'kid' for? I'm Danny McClellan."

"Danny Mc-huh!" the other ejaculated, pushing the corral gate open to grip the extended hand. "How you've growed up! Gosh, Danny! Your ole Uncle Mac's sure tickled to see you. And to think you got here just in time to save my bacon!"

"And in time to ketch a coyote." Danny pointed to the prostrate Lodeen. "Do you break all of his broncs, Uncle Mac?"

"Yeh. Why?" the other asked.

"Then that's the reason he wanted the Red Ripper," Danny went on. "Lodeen wanted to kill you, and make it look like an accident. What would he get out of it, if you was killed?"

Owen McClellan looked puzzled.

"Well," he said at last, "I don't know what you're drivin' at, Danny. But if I was to kick off right sudden-like, I guess maybe Bart Lodeen'd grab my place here for that thousand dollars worth of notes he's holdin' agin it—and unless you happened to show up and prove you're my heir.

"But dogonit, I'm still as lost as a blind dogie on the Painted Desert. You talkin' about a 'Red Ripper,' then floorin' Lodeen with my gun and—"

"I'll do some explainin' while I'm tyin' Mr. Lodeen up," Danny answered, grinning. "And when the aforesaid comes to, I'll bet he'll be tickled to death just to cancel them notes of yourn, Uncle Mac—'fore he hightails it to parts unknown."

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THE HITCHING RAIL

(Continued from page 120)

words. I shore oughta know them, Billy.

Glad yuh've started in tuh write stories, but better spend couple years or so on th' range first, Billy. Western folks gits plumb hostile when a fella uses coined words an' callin' it "cowboy lingo."

'Sides, gotta fling a laig 'crost many a saddle afore yuh kin feel th' thing in yore soul. Take a good squint at th' yarns our boss' givin' you-all. Every one writ by a fella what's shore pounded leather over many a range, an' et his meals packed with sand. Each ain't not only read, but has actually seen an' done his stuff, years.

"Dallyin'" and "Tyin'"

Well, Billy, comin' down tuh straight goods, I'll git answerin' yore questions. "Dallyin' means takin' one or more twists round yore saddle horn when yo're ropin' cattle or broncs. "Tyin'" means really tyin' th' end o' yore rope tuh th' horn afore ropin'.

Some punchers prefers one way, some th' other. We calls sech men "Dally" men or "Tie" men, tuh distinguish 'em apart. Dallyin's safer fer th' rider, as he kin turn his rope loose case o' accident or hung rope—caught round yore hoss's laigs or wrong on th' steer.

Yuh let's 'bout a foot or so of yore end o' th' rope stay in yore ropin' hand, then comes th' one or two twists round th' horn, other end on th' steer. When th' jerk comes, ef anythin' goes wrong, a dally man can let go his rope an' all's well. A "Tie" man cain't.

It's bust or be busted.

They's a Lotta Diff'rence

An' yuh asts what's th' diff'rence between "Circlin'" an' what we cow-folks calls "Turnin' back." Lotta diff'rence, Billy. When out on a round-up, we're there tuh circle the country and drive in all cattle we finds tuh th' main brandin' point where other men's waitin' tuh throw th' cattle inside th' brandin' corral. We go out single or in pairs, combin' th' country in circles laid out by th' boss o' th' drive. But "Turnin' back" means where we go out other times, huntin' up cattle an' hosses what's strayed, an' turn 'em back closer tuh th' home ranch, where we turns 'em loose again tuh graze.

"Turnin' back" of'en comes durin' hard weather, blizzards an' th' like, where we rides hard and far tuh turn back any critters what's lost or apt tuh git froze where there ain't no grazin' or windbreaks in th' hills. Well, Billy, that's that. Luck!

Lillian Caldwell, o' Niagara, New York, writes in tuh know how a back fire's handled. Lilly, hope yuh won't be mad ef I tells yuh yore picture's 'bout th' nicest thing we've received in a long trail drive o' photographs. It's plumb glorious.

So durned pretty yuh got me off'n yore question 'bout back firin'. It's used thisaway, Lilly. Big fire's rompin' through th' hills or 'crost th' plains. Gotta be stopped.

Yuh goes clost tuh th' big fire as yuh kin, mebbe real clost, mebbe a mile away, an' starts another fire, makin' it long's yuh kin handle. 'Course, th' wind's drivin' th' main fire right to'ards yuh. Gotta work fast.

But yuh keeps yore own fire burnin' an' it'll eat up a wide space, full length, leavin' only burned ground. The width o' yore back fire's as wide as yuh have men tuh handle, so it, itself, won't just be another fire ahead o' th' main one.

Takes Hard Work!

This means tha. yore men must keep beatin' out th' back fire so it cain't git ahaid o' yuh an' become like I says, jest another fire ahaid o' th' main one. Takes tough, grippin', hard work, Lilly. We try tuh make a burned space 'bout twenty or more feet wide an' as long as th' main fire itself.

Then, when the main fire reaches yore back fire, it finds the grass all burned off already an' stops, 'less th' wind's so strong it jumps th' burned space. This, however, ain't apt tuh happen, but yuh gotta remember 'bout what yo're doin' an' make yore back fire wide as yuh got men tuh handle.

When It's a "Crown" Fire

'Course, I'm speakin' uv a *ground* fire now. When it's a "Crown" fire (up in th' tops o' trees, in thick forests) a mere back fire on th' ground won't help a whole lot. We gotta use it, clost as we can, but we're pretty apt tuh be beat, as th' crown fire'll leap wide spaces an' ketch other tree-tops.

(Concluded on page 128)

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"My daughter's goitre is reduced, thanks to you. Our doctor says she is now sound as a dollar," says the Rev. S. A. Cotton, Washington, North Carolina. Pictured above is Miss Sophia Kurie before and after using a simple, easy, harmless home treatment of a great Battle Creek Specialist. This treatment which has already been used by 250,000 others is described in a book on "How to Reduce Goitre Quickly." Anyone suffering with Goitre will receive this book Free by sending their name at once to

PHYSICIANS TREATMENT & ADVISORY CO.
Suite 051-O, Sanborn Bldg, Battle Creek, Mich.

(Concluded from page 127)

After talkin' with two real forest rangers 'bout yore question, Lilly, I got one conclusion 'bout a crown fire—it's jest gotta burn itself out, an' best we kin do is pray fer a hard rain. An' I've shore seen both kinds, Lilly.

Well, folks, gotta stop fer this time. Mebbe th' boss'll have another o' them dictums some day, an' I'm aimin' tuh discover how many kinds they is. Blondie's got me worrit. A whole lot of members, now, uv our RANGE RIDERS' CLUB. Better join up, *pronto*. An' our SWAP department's still growin' nice. PLEASE, fellas an' gals, use th' coupon on this page, so we'll know what yarns yuh likes best. Big help tuh us, ev'ry month.

Next Month's Issue

THE TWO-GUN TRAIL, by Johnston McCulley, will be th' complete book-length novel next month—an' it's a humdinger that's sure packed with action an' breathes th' tang o' saddle leather from fust t' last. Then they's COLD STEEL—TEXAS STYLE, by Galen C. Colin, a hell-fer-leather novelette, an' short stories by top-hands like Claude Rister an' Wilton West. We've corraled th' best fer thet February number, an' all yuh rannies—be on hand!

Well, hate leavin' yuh, even fer thirty days, but. . . . Hola ag'in, an' don't fergit readin' every yarn in next issue. Them writers shore slings 'em hard an' plumb straight.

Buck Benson

APPLICATION

1-35

BUCK BENSON,
The Range Riders' Club,
THRILLING WESTERN,
570 Seventh Ave., N. Y.

I'm rarin' to join your outfit. Here's my brand.

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(Name)

Address .....

City ..... State.....

Stories and features I liked best in this issue .....

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..... Age.....

If you desire a membership card, enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope

BOYS! THROW YOUR VOICE

Into a trunk, under the bed or anywhere. Lots of fun fooling teacher, policeman or friends.

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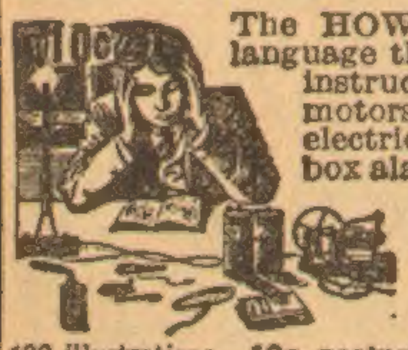
a little instrument, fits in the mouth out of sight, used with above for Bird Calls etc. Anyone can use it. **Never fails. A 16-page course on Ventriloquism and the Ventrilo. All for 10c Postpaid.**

JOHNSON SMITH & CO. Dept. 612, RACINE, WIS.

BOY AMATEUR ELECTRICIAN 10c

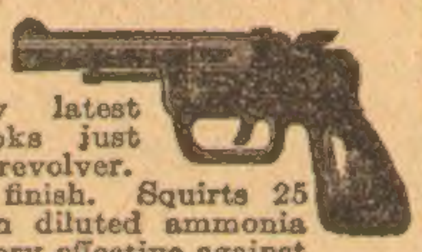


The HOW and WHY of electricity fully told in simple language that any boy can understand. Scores of plans and instructions for making—dry batteries, dynamos, electric motors, telegraph apparatus, telephones, electric lights, electric door bells, alarms, electric engine, rheostat, mail box alarm, electro-magnets, automatic incandescent flash, electric shocking machine, wireless telegraph apparatus, induction coil, arc light, current reverser, etc., etc. Tells all about electric wiring, static electricity, magnets and magnetism, conductors and insulators, electrostatic induction, electroscope, electrophorus, condensers, Leyden jar dynamic electricity, the voltaic cell, electromagnets, electrolysis, electro-plating, electrotyping, how to build a radio for a few cents, etc. 64 pages. 100 Illustrations. **10c. postpaid. JOHNSON SMITH & CO., Dept. 612, RACINE, WIS.**

MAKE YOUR OWN RADIO

Enjoy the concerts, baseball games, market reports, latest news, etc. This copyrighted book "EFFICIENT RADIO SETS" shows how to make and operate inexpensive Radio Sets, the materials for which can be purchased for a mere trifle. Also tells how to build a short-wave Receiver for bringing in foreign stations, police calls, ships at sea, etc. **ONLY 15c p.pd.**

Daisy Water Pistol



6-Shot Repeating Water Pistol—very latest design; looks just like a Police revolver. Blue steel finish. Squirts 25 feet. When diluted ammonia is used is very effective against vicious dogs, tramps, animals. 7 inches long. Very simple to load and discharge. **PRICE 25c POSTPAID.**

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With a bunch of these bills, it is easy for each person of limited means to appear prosperous by flashing a roll of these bills at the proper time and peeling off a genuine bill or two from the outside of the roll, the effect created will be found to be all that can be desired. **Prices: 15 Bills 10c, 40 Bills 20c, 120 for 50c or $3.50 per thousand postpaid.**

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Greatest boys' book written. Tells how to make a Pinhole Camera, a Canoe, model Railroad, a Telephone, Boomerang, Telegraph Instrument, Box Kite, Talking Machine, Microscope, Electric Motor, Electric Door Bell, Water Wheel, Paddle Raft, a pair of Skis, a Dog Sled, Bird House, Rabbit Yard, etc. 64 pages. 150 illustrations. PRICE 10c.

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25c 50c $1.00

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Say what you will about Electrical and Battery Sets, a CRYSTAL set has them all beat for simplicity and clearness of tone. There is absolutely no noise and no distortion—no batteries to buy—no tubes to wear out—no maintenance expense whatsoever. Cost nothing to operate and will last indefinitely. Reception is loud and clear. This Receiver is guaranteed to work equal to the most expensive Crystal Set you can buy. Has a receiving radius of over 25 miles, or under favorable conditions up to 100 miles. Constructed of the finest materials throughout, including supersensitive crystal, assuring quick results. PRICE of Receiver only **$1.00 postpaid.** Or complete with Ear Phone and Aerial Kit—everything all complete—nothing more to buy. **$2.95 postpaid. JOHNSON SMITH & CO., Dept. 612, RACINE, WIS.**

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LIVE, SAFE DELIVERY GUARANTEED

Watch it change its color!

Get one of these most wonderful of all creatures. Watch it change its color. Study its habits. Wear one on the lapel of your coat as a curiosity. Watch it shoot out its tongue as it catches flies and insects for food. No trouble to keep. Can go for months without food. Measures about 4 inches in length. Shipped to any address in U. S. A. by mail. We guarantee safe arrival and live delivery. PRICE 25 CENTS POSTPAID.

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326 Jokes and Riddles, 25 Magic Tricks, 10 Parlor Games, 73 Toasts, 13 Fairy Tales, 105 Money-making Secrets, 22 Monologues, 21 Puzzles and Problems, 5 Comic Recitations, 10 Funny Readings, 11 Parlor Pastimes, 13 Flirtations, 1110 Girls' and Boys' Names and their Meanings, 10 Picture Puzzles, 69 Amusing Rhymes, 37 Amusing Experiments, Deaf and Dumb Alphabet, Shadowgraphy, Gypsy Fortune Teller, How to Tell Fortunes with Cards, Dice, Dominoes, Crystal, Coffee Cup, etc. Hypnotism, Ventriloquism, Cut-outs for Checkers and Chess, Dominoes, Fox and Geese, 9 Men Morris, Spanish Prison Puzzle, Game of Anagrams, 25 Card Tricks, Crystal Gazing, etc. ALL FOR 15c.

6-Shot Repeating Pistol

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Just Like Real Revolver

For a toy revolver, this is a splendid imitation of the real thing. At first glance it might easily be taken for a regular revolver. It is a FULL SIZE WEAPON, well made, with blue steel baked enamel finish. It fires from 6 to 8 rubber bands in rapid succession, as fast as you can pull the trigger. It breaks open in the middle just like an expensive revolver. Measures 8 inches long, with 3-inch barrel. Strongly made of 20 gauge steel. Looks exactly like a real gun and clicks like one when fired. A supply of rubber bands given with each gun. Packed in individual carton complete with directions. PRICE 25 CENTS BY MAIL POSTPAID.

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AWAY with false modesty! At last a famous doctor has told *all* the secrets of sex in frank, daring language. No prudish beating about the bush, no veiled hints, but TRUTH, blazing through 576 pages of straightforward facts.

Love is the most *magnificent ecstacy* in the world . . . know how to hold your loved one . . . don't glean half-truths from unreliable sources. Now you can know how to end ignorance...fear...and self denial!

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The 106 illustrations leave nothing to the imagination . . . know how to overcome physical mismating . . . know what to do on your wedding night to avoid the torturing results of ignorance.

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- What to Allow a Lover to do
- Intimate Feminine Hygiene
- Prostitution
- Birth Control Chart
- How to Attract and Hold Men
- Sexual Slavery of Women
- Essentials of Happy Marriage
- The Sex Organs

HOMOSEXUALITY...SEX ABNORMALITIES

Do you know about the astounding world of "half sexes"? They crave the companionship of their own sex...their practices are unbelievable to the normal mind...yet you should understand them.

Money back at once if you are not satisfied!

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Don't be a *slave* to ignorance and fear. Enjoy the rapturous delights of the perfect physical love!

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There is no longer any need to pay the *awful price* for one moment of bliss. Read the scientific pathological facts told so bravely by Dr. Rubin. The chapters on venereal disease are alone worth the price of the book.

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BEFORE you buy any radio write for the new FREE 1935 Midwest "Fifteenth Anniversary" catalog and see for yourself the many reasons why 110,000 satisfied customers bought their radios direct from the Midwest Laboratories and saved from ⅓ to ½. Why pay more than the direct-to-you laboratory price?

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This bigger, better, more powerful, clearer-toned, super selective radio gives you absolute realism—assures you of life-like, crystal-clear tone—unlike anything you have ever experienced before! You will hear one more octave—overtones—that cannot be brought in with ordinary radios. Now, hear every instrument, every voice, every shade and inflection of speech. Take advantage of the amazing 30-day FREE trial offer. Send coupon today for FREE catalog.

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Only Midwest covers a tuning range of 9 to 2400 meters (33 Megacycles to 125 KC.)—enabling you to easily and successfully tune in foreign stations up to 12,000 miles away with crystal-clear, loud-speaker reception.

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50 ADVANCED 1935 FEATURES . . .

...and 16 tubes make this Super High Fidelity Radio today's most powerful long distance receiver. Its many exclusive features include: Micro-Tenuator . . . Fidel-A-Stat . . . Separate Audio Generator . . . Ceramic Coil Forms, etc.

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This dial takes the guesswork out of tuning. Now Midwest guarantees that inexperienced persons can secure good foreign reception. Send for FREE miniature of actual rotating dial — which clearly shows the advantages of these sensational features.

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I'll FILL your POCKETBOOK

and Give You a Brand New Ford Tudor Sedan for producing

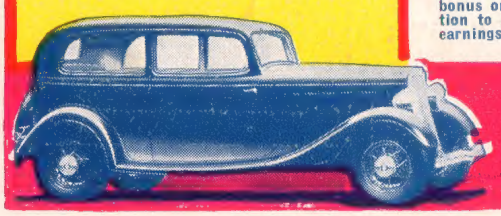
HERE'S a Wonderful Chance to Step into a Good-Paying Tea and Coffee Route Right in Your Own Locality. No experience Needed—I'll Give You What Little Training Necessary—No Red Tape—Earnings Start at Once.

LOOK AT THESE UNUSUAL EARNINGS

If you have been working for a boss and your pay has been limited; if you are weary of pinching and striving to exist, here's an opportunity to change all this. With my route plan you can stop time-clock punching forever. Here's what some others have already done. Chester Clay, N. Mex., made $10.00 in two hours. Howard B. Ziegler, Pa., made $21.60 in a day and $103.32 in a week. Lambert Wilson, Mich., made $79.00 in one week. Ray Chapman, Mo., cleared $73.50 in a week. These exceptional earnings show the remarkable possibilities of my route plan.

SPECIAL OPENINGS FOR WOMEN

I have a wonderful opportunity for women on local Tea and Coffee Routes. Earnings run up to $5.00 a day just in spare time. The work is light and pleasant and the profits exceptionally big. Housewives, school teachers, office workers, factory workers—all find my new and novel plans for spare-time work highly profitable. If you have other work to do just start in spare-time. Mrs. C. R. Luoma, W. Va., averaged $40.00 a week for a year on one of these routes. Mrs. Preston Portwood, Ga., quit a $10.00 a week department store job and cleared $7.50 the first afternoon. These unusual earnings show what big money women can make. I now have an even better plan to offer you. Send me your name today.



PERMANENT FOOD ROUTES PAY UP TO $60.00 A WEEK

I'll start you in a big-paying business of your own—you don't risk anything. Sounds astonishing! It is a revelation to men and women in immediate need of cash. This is a public announcement of a time-tried and thoroughly proven plan for quick relief from your money worries. I need more people to operate local Tea and Coffee Routes at once. These routes pay up to $60.00 a week. Even spare-time Route Owners make up to $5.00 a day. I back you up and take the risk.

IMMEDIATE EARNINGS

It's your job to distribute the goods and collect the cash. You keep a big share of it for yourself. You don't have to wait—profits start pouring in immediately. I place "Ready Made" plans for success in your hands just as soon as you join me. I have spent years and a fortune in cash for these things I give you free of extra cost. With my plans you pocket all the profit. You don't divide up with anyone.

HOUSEHOLD SUPPLIES PAY BEST

Look around—you will see men making big weekly incomes from laundry routes, dairy routes or bakery routes. My route plans are still better. I manufacture nearly 300 fine food products and necessities used daily in almost every home—things people must buy to live. I furnish you wonderful new route plans, and fine premiums for your customers. Your earnings are big right from the start. Think of having relief from money worries with the thrill of seeing your business grow bigger every week.

FORD CARS GIVEN

I back up my Route Owners to bring them unheard-of earnings. I even give Ford Tudor Sedans — free of extra cost—as a bonus to my producers. This is in addition to the regular big daily cash profits. Send name today for big booklet crammed full of facts. You will be amazed at my liberal offer.

SEND NO MONEY YOU RISK NOTHING

I want to hear from you at once so I can lay all the facts before you, then you can be the judge. You may be just the person I am looking for. You don't risk a cent. If you need cash don't miss this opportunity. It might not appear again. Right now while it is before you, put name on coupon or penny postcard—mail—rush today.

I give brand new Ford Tudor Sedans to my producers. Not a prize or a raffle—but an extra bonus or reward in addition to your regular cash earnings.

Send no money

ALBERT MILLS, President
7402 Monmouth Ave., Cincinnati, O.

Rush me free facts on your Route Plan, telling how I can start earning up to $60.00 a week at once. I understand there is no obligation on my part. You are to send me your plans and complete facts, and I am to be the judge.

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Address.....

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(Please Print or Write Plainly)